

Dragon's Glen

by CLS

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Summary: Musings about what it's like to be a werewolf: Remus Lupin attempts to hide from the world post-PoA, but Dumbledore has a little job for him, one that will reveal much hidden in his past and in himself. WORK IN PROGRESS.

1. The Wolf in the Cage

Dragon's Glen: 1. The Wolf in the Cage __**1. The Wolf in the Cage**

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The wolf leaps in the air, twisting and snapping at the full moon. It lands and howls with joyous defiance.

The sound dies away. Nothing answers. Gray eyes glitter in the moonlight as the beast stands fixed like an icicle swaying on a branch poised to drop. It takes in sounds and smells with small movements of its head. Then, nose to the ground, the wolf moves forward cautiously, eager to know what has happened in this place since it last came.

A frightened bird takes flight as the wolf slinks into the shadow of an enormous beech tree. Leaves rustle frantically, followed by the precise beat of wings cutting through the air and then fading into silence. The wolf barely pauses as it prowls restlessly around the base of the tree. From the deep shelter of the shadow, the creature scans the open space, brilliantly lit by the moon now risen above the tops of the surrounding trees. Keen ears hear nothing but the rustle of damp leaves underfoot.__

Patterns of dark and light, shadows cast by the tree, dance over the rough wooden exterior of a building. The wolf utters a soft growl. This is a shelter built by its enemy, _human_.

Abandoning caution, the animal leaves the shadows and dashes forward, circling the building slowly at first and then faster in frustrated

fury. The wolf, unable to distinguish the tightly shuttered windows from the wooden shingles, can find no openings. The door, however, reeks of human. Pushing with nose, then paws, the creature digs into the door, clawing savagely at the smooth wood. When the door does not yield, the wolf stands on its hind legs and rams the door with head and shoulders. A metal bar, gleaming dully in the moonlight and holding the door fast, burns with such cold fire that the beast falls back, yelping.

Incensed, the wolf begins pacing rapidly back and forth, never straying far from the door. It hates human with an ancient fury beyond any rivalry for food or territory. Lust for hot, red blood, the blood of human, rises inside the wolf who hungers to feel its teeth tearing into flesh, and then to howl triumphantly with its bloody muzzle raised to the moon.

Next to the door a pile of blankets holds the scent of human. With a deep and ferocious snarl, the beast tears into the blankets with its teeth, holding them down with its paws and ripping as if this might appease its hunger. Unsatisfied, the wolf lets the blankets fall with a shake of its head, the urge to kill blunted. Nearby a wooden trough glitters with the moon's dazzling reflection and then explodes as the beast greedily plunges its muzzle into the cool water. Afterward, the wolf sits panting, watching and listening.

White as bleached bones, the moon sails overhead. For the wolf it is liberator and jailor both, uncaring companion of the hunt, forever beyond reach. The cold light burns the wolf, piercing flesh, searing nerves, turning blood into liquid fire. The beast bays at the moon, filling the open space with shrieks that penetrate the thick forest beyond. Echoes surge and swell so that for a moment the voices of a hundred wolves fill the cleared space between the building and the fence. When the wolf falls silent, the echoes die away, the phantom wolves slipping soundlessly into the forest beyond.

The fence. The wolf knows that this, too, was made by human. Close-set pieces of wood shimmer in the moonlight, forming a solid wall rising out of the grass and stretching up to the trees which lie beyond, their dark shapes visible over the top of the fence. Rising, the wolf begins to run next to the fence, slowly at first, then faster as if it knows that it will find no opening, no reason to halt. After several circuits around the enclosure, the wolf stops, recognizing the gate.

Perhaps the wolf thinks the gate will yield more readily or perhaps it detects more signs of human at this spot.

The wolf cautiously inspects the gate which is constructed like the rest of the fence from wooden planks set so closely together as to give little view of what lies beyond. A metal bar cuts across the middle. The creature stands up on hind legs pushing with its paws, but avoids the bar, remembering how the one on the door of the building burned. Even stretched upward this way, the wolf cannot see over the top of the fence. When the gate does not yield, the wolf drops to all fours and backs away from the gate slowly while continuing to glare at it. Then the beast rushes forward, leaping into the air with legs extended to meet the top of the gate.

Flames of brilliant blue shoot into the air as its paws contact the

gate, crackling violently and showering the wolf with sparks which singe and bite its flesh. Yelping and twisting the wolf falls to the ground, rolling to rid itself of the painful burning on its fur.

Panting and crouching on all fours, it sits up and then slams into the gate at a run. The gate barely shudders. The wolf tries several more times to ram the gate and succeeds only in bruising and cutting its shoulders. The gate does not yield.

Fury erupts from the beast in a torrent of snarls and howls. With nose and paws, the wolf attacks, clawing the bottom of the gate. Blue flames once again blaze forth sending the animal reeling backward, blinded and howling. The wolf stands up and limps back toward the gate, paws cut and bleeding but rage undiminished. The night is young. It will try again.

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Sunlight winked through trees and fell upon the ground in untidy splashes making wet blades of grass sparkle. Birds flitted between the ground and branches, twittering with the nervous excitement they feel when dawn releases them from night's dangers.

A patch of sunlight marched forward over the grass and touched the blanket, climbing up and over the folds of coarse wool which outlined the figure of a man who groaned faintly as the blanket fell open and sunshine beat against his closed eyes. He shivered and pulled the blanket over his head.

After several minutes, he groaned again, a little louder this time, and struggled to sit up, rocking his shoulders and lifting his head with great effort.

The light hurt his eyes. He began to be aware that his body hurt, too. Everywhere. Breathing was difficult. That could mean broken ribs. The blanket fell open, exposing his bare chest to the chill morning air. He grabbed the edge of the blanket, pulling it closed, and then stiffened with a sharp cry of pain. His left wrist felt as if it were broken.

He sat quietly for some time with the blanket wrapped around his shoulders, eyes closed. Gray hair, tangled and matted with dirt, fell across his eyes. Underneath the dirt and scratches, his face was pale and gaunt. His eyes blinked open and he stared in an unfocused way for a moment. Then he sighed with a small movement of his head and a faint grimace on his lips.

With more effort he rose to a standing position. No other bones appeared to be broken as he turned and limped toward the small cabin. Painful steps brought him to the door. With his undamaged hand, he struggled to lift a heavy metal bar that lay across the door. He let the bar drop to the ground and stood for a time with his head against the door, gathering the strength needed to open it.

Sunlight burst into the cabin as he stepped inside. The man stumbled as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, bumping into a wooden chair a few steps from the door. He gripped the back of the chair for support and then slowly lowered himself to a seated position, his breathing growing ragged from the effort. He put his right hand on the small

round table immediately next to the chair to steady himself.

As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he could see three objects on the table: a pewter pitcher filled with water, a bar of chocolate, and a long, slender wooden rod.

Things could certainly be worse, he thought as he picked up the wooden rod. It was his wand. The man's name was Remus Lupin and he was a wizard.

His hand shook as he grasped the wand and pointed at the great stone fireplace set in one wall of the cabin. "\_Incendio\_" he said weakly. Nothing happened. Holding his wand as steady as he could, which took immense concentration given his current state, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath and cried, "\_Incendio\_!"

He did not need to open his eyes to see the sudden blaze; he heard the violent crackling and felt the warmth of the fire soak into his skin. A sigh of satisfaction escaped his lips as he let the wand fall.

The throbbing pain in his wrist would not let him alone, however. Opening his eyes, he picked up his wand and lightly drew a complicated figure across the back of his hand as it lay on the table.

"\_Osteosanos\_" he murmured and then closed his eyes once more. The pain receded as the bones knit together. Although not his specialty, he knew quite a few healing charms. He learned them out of necessity since this happened to him more or less every month. In addition to being a wizard, Lupin was also a werewolf.

Even a wizard could not evade the werewolf curse, once bitten. Remus had been bitten as a small boy. Extraordinary efforts by his parents and others allowed him to go to wizard school, the happiest time of his life. After that, however, he found that few in his world wanted to actually employ a werewolf. He drifted through many jobs in the nearly twenty years since leaving school, although the only ones he truly enjoyed were teaching. His last teaching job ended spectacularly badly three years earlier and he had not tried to find another.

He came finally to this old cabin belonging to his family in an isolated part of Wales, having some vague hope of writing a book on Defense Against the Dark Arts. He had always been fascinated by the many ways to defeat dark creatures. Unlike most wizards, the Dark Arts held no great terror for him; he looked into the dark abyss each month when the moon was full.

And he felt weary of hiding what he was, of seeing the mixture of fear and pity on people's faces when the truth came out, as it usually did. He slumped toward the table, cradling his head with his right arm, and slept.

He ran on all fours across a grassy plain, feeling the wind in his fur and the soft grass underfoot. Overhead a huge milky white orb shone, like the eye of some unearthly creature that defied the very boundaries of the world. The harsh light painted everything with a cruel palette of black, white, and gray. He ran. He heard heavy panting not his own and felt hot, moist breath on his back. He did

not turn to look upon it, but knew it to be an enormous beast in the shape of a wolf with glowing yellow eyes and white fangs that dripped and gleamed in the moonlight. He stumbled, slamming into the ground as his legs gave way beneath him. He howled at the terrible moon and clawed at the ground as the jaws closed around his neck.\_

Remus jerked awake with a start, gulping jagged breaths and forcing himself to calm down. He struggled to escape from the dream, the wolf dream. It had haunted him since he was a boy and always ended in the same way, with the kill. Sometimes the beast hunted with him and the screams of terrified humans reverberated through his dream.

But sometimes the beast hunted him, catching him and tearing him to pieces while the cold moon looked on.

He stretched out a shaking hand toward the bar of chocolate, grasping it and fumbling with the wrapper. He forced himself to concentrate on the intricacy of the shiny gold foil, slowly teasing open the wrapping and smoothing it flat against the table. He broke off a piece, popped it into his mouth and swallowing, began to feel warmth flow back into his limbs.

The fire crackled and birds sang outside. Remus extended his arms across the table, feeling the bruised muscles respond sluggishly. The sun had risen higher in the sky while he slept so that it no longer poked a long finger across the floor of the cabin through the open door. Pushing himself back from the table, he stood and stretched his arms upward. His body throbbed with cuts and bruises, nothing more serious that he could tell. He would heal them, as always.

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The sun had passed its zenith when Lupin emerged from the cabin, washed and dressed in clean if shabby clothes. Walking slowly and deliberately, he inspected the outside of the cabin and then the fence for signs of damage, ending at the gate. He shrugged at the grooved marks of claws ripping through the grass near the gate, but frowned at the bits of singed hair lying on the ground, thinking of times past in which the wolf did not have to be confined when the moon was full.

Tired as he was from last night, he would visit the small village nearby and see about getting food. There was precious little left now that he had finished his last chocolate bar. And a wizard could not always conjure food out of thin air. He counted a few pieces of silver left in his dwindling cache of money. In addition, he knew a few wizard families who would barter with him, food for odd jobs such as expelling boggarts, detecting hexes, and catching pixies.

He took out his wand, arm trembling slightly, and gave the word of command. With a faint flash of blue light, the magical spell that enveloped the fence disappeared. His arm shook so violently that the wand dropped to the ground. He leaned against the gate, gulping ragged breaths, and tried to stop shaking. After some minutes, he stepped back from the gate, took a deep breath and picked up his wand, carefully tucking it into his belt. As he swung the gate open, he saw a most astonishing and unexpected sight.

Standing in the dappled afternoon sunlight was a thin old man with a long silver beard flowing down the front of his purple cloak. He wore a pointed hat on top of his head. Perched on his long, crooked nose were a pair of half moon spectacles behind which a pair of blue eyes regarded Lupin kindly.

"Professor Dumbledore," croaked Remus in surprise, unaccustomed to speaking and more than a little embarrassed to see this particular person, Albus Dumbledore the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"Albus. Please call me Albus," the old man said gently with a broad smile on his face and a twinkle in his blue eyes. His voice floated through the spring air, thin and reedy but compelling, like a powerful song heard from a great distance. "It is many years, Remus, since I had much to teach you."

Remus smiled faintly and nodded his head toward Dumbledore in a sketch of a bow.

"Superb job on the fence spell," Dumbledore said with delight, waving his arms fluidly in a gesture that seemed to take in the fence and more besides. "You have mastered a very tricky charm. I have been waiting for some time for you to open the gate."

"Thank you, er, Albus," Remus said with a slight shake of his head. "Although I feel sure that you could have broken the spell if you desired." He also doubted that Dumbledore had been waiting for long. He often appeared at precisely the right moment, a trait which unnerved many people.

"Perhaps," replied Dumbledore with a dismissive wave of his hand, "but I do not like to destroy another wizard's work, especially when it is of such high quality."

The hushed song of the late afternoon forest swirled around them, a remote and melancholy opera in which birds sang and trees sighed in the wind. Dumbledore regarded with concern the gaunt figure and suspected that the three years since their last meeting had not been kind. Lupin's clothes, faded but neat, hung on his frame. Thick hair, all gray now, fell across a broad forehead. Deep-set gray eyes were ringed with dark shadows. Pale skin stretched across prominent cheekbones and a thin nose, defining a face which still looked surprisingly young in stark contrast to the gray hair.

"I was just going-" Remus began, but broke off uncertainly. He remembered their last meeting at Hogwarts with shame and bitter regret. In the three years since then, he had received several messages by owl from Dumbledore inquiring after him. He had not replied. He looked down at his feet for a moment and then met Dumbledore's steady gaze.

"My schedule seems quite free this afternoon, if you would like to come in. I'm afraid that all I can offer you is tea, however."

"I brought a few things with me," said Dumbledore cheerfully, stepping aside to reveal behind him two large boxes wrapped in paper and tied with string. "It's Easter holidays at school, you know, and the kitchens aren't very busy."

Dumbledore tapped the packages with his wand and they promptly sprouted feet and began marching in place. With an amused nod of his head, Remus motioned for Dumbledore to proceed him, trailed by the two packages, lurching along one after the other. After passing through the gate, Dumbledore paused to look around at the sweep of the fence. "Most impressive," he said with satisfaction and then resumed walking toward the cabin.

At the door, the packages marched in place, bouncing vigorously like stout soldiers ordered to wear enormous boxes over their heads. Still grinning, Remus unlocked the door with his wand and waited for Dumbledore to enter. However, the old wizard stood gazing at the clapboard exterior of the cabin, one hand resting lightly on the wood.

"A fine tree - an oak, I believe - gave its life for this house." he said without turning his head.

"My grandparents built this cabin. I spent summers here as a boy," Remus replied soberly. He looked into the interior with eyes unfocused for a moment. As the silence lengthened, Dumbledore sighed and turned to face him. The clear blue eyes seemed to pierce his heart and make further explanation unnecessary.

"Let us have some tea, then," Dumbledore said briskly and pointed his wand at the marching boxes, then at the inside of the cabin. In they paraded, hopping first onto a chair and then up to the table with a series of comical thumps. With a final flourish, Dumbledore waved his wand and the boxes were merely boxes once more.

Remus turned to the stone hearth which dominated one wall of the cabin. He raised his wand and the fire blazed. With his back to Dumbledore, he began to take down cups, saucers, and a teapot from the wooden shelves which flanked the stone chimney.

As he took off his hat and great cloak, directing them to stand together near the door like a purple sultan's tent, Dumbledore looked round at the small room, which seemed to function as kitchen, dining room and study. The hearth and chimney, constructed of hewn blocks of stone, sat squarely in one of the walls next to the entrance. Open shelves on either side of the chimney held dishes, but no food that he could see. Opposite the entrance to the cabin was an open door giving a view into a bedroom containing a large bed covered by a quilt and a small table stacked with books. On the wall opposite the hearth stood a large oak desk with a window on either side. Low bookshelves under the windows looked to be of recent construction and were crammed with books. Massive wooden beams, darkened with age, stretched overhead. The floor was worn but neatly made of close-fitting oak planks. The large wool rug that lay squarely in the middle of the room seemed to hold Dumbledore's attention for some time as he paced around its edges. He clucked softly to himself and then turned his attention to the bookshelves.

Dumbledore surely had a reason in coming, Remus thought curiously as he set tea things on the table, although he could not fathom what it might be. A wave of his wand caused steam to issue from the kettle hanging above the hearth. He poured steaming water into a chipped teapot while continuing to stare at Dumbledore, now leafing through a book from one of the shelves.

Some minutes passed; Remus lost track of time entirely, but a check of the teapot showed the tea to be nicely steeped.

"Tea is ready," he said hesitantly.

Shutting the book with a decided snap, Dumbledore turned to face him. Still holding the book, he gestured at the shelves and the piles of parchment on the desk. "Quite a collection of books. I see that you have not abandoned your studies," Dumbledore said as he put the book down and crossed the room.

He produced his wand and tapped the parcels lightly. The strings untied themselves, the paper fell away, and the boxes opened to disclose a jumble of jars and many different-sized packages wrapped in paper. Remus gasped involuntarily as Dumbledore directed the packages to open revealing neat piles of scones, teacakes, biscuits, a large basket of strawberries, pots of milk and butter, jars of preserves, and rows of sliced ham.

"You did not have to--" Remus started and then faltered, acutely embarrassed. After a moment's silence, he said, "I'll just fry up some ham, then." He turned and took a skillet from the shelf. Without meeting Dumbledore's eyes, he quickly put several slices of ham into the pan and set it above the hearth.

Dumbledore waved his wand and plates floated down from the shelves. Utensils danced through the air and arranged themselves on the table while baked goods swarmed out of their wrappings and nestled onto plates. The paper wrappings marched off the table and folded themselves on the floor. All the while, Dumbledore swished his wand here and there as if directing a silent orchestra. Then he sat down and poured himself a cup of tea.

He was thoughtfully stirring his cup when Remus turned back to regard the table, still holding the sizzling skillet. He could only stare in astonishment at the enormous amount of food arrayed on the table. He had not seen so much altogether since leaving Hogwarts with its spectacular feasts.

"I do manage to eat - on my own, I mean," he said as he tilted the skillet, sliding the ham onto an empty plate. He set the skillet back on the hearth and sat down.

"Perhaps you would rather spend your money on books," Dumbledore replied absently while spooning a large dollop of clotted cream onto a scone. "Worthwhile pursuit - knowledge, that is - but a wizard must eat."

Remus closed his eyes, suddenly overcome by the smell of the food and so hungry that he could not bear the thought of eating. If anything, he felt ill; the gnawing hunger was a beast crouched inside him, refusing to let food pass his lips. He opened his eyes to meet Dumbledore's steady gaze.

"A lot of these books were mine... from before. I kept them at my mother's house." Defiantly he took a scone and bit into it, although it felt dry and tasteless in his mouth and he fought to swallow.

"I have a little money," Remus began after putting the half-eaten

scone down,"from my mother. She died last year and there is no one else to"

"I am sorry, Remus," Dumbledore said after a moment, sounding shocked and saddened. "Very sorry. Your mother was a wonderful woman. She used to send me a card at Christmas every year. Did you know? And a Christmas cake."

Remus shook his head as his eyes filled with tears. His mother had often spoken of Dumbledore, of his kindness in accepting him as a boy at Hogwarts when it looked as if he would never be able to attend school, never be able to have a normal life.

Well, I still can't have a normal life, Remus thought angrily. I cannot escape what I am nor can I repay the debts I owe.

He rose swiftly from the table, pushing his chair back so hard that it fell against the hearthstone with a sharp crack. Crossing the room, he stood staring out the window with his back turned to Dumbledore, absentmindedly fingering scrolls of parchment on the desk. Without turning, he said coldly, "Surely you didn't come all this way to remind me of how poor I am."

"Of course not, Remus," Dumbledore replied gently, "I came to offer you a job."

Remus turned to regard Dumbledore, now contentedly buttering a teacake, with mute astonishment. One hand gripped the desk for support. The last job offer from Dumbledore, the teaching assignment at Hogwarts, turned out so badly that he could not imagine the faculty (especially certain teachers) nor the school governors allowing another. He ran his hand through his hair, unsure of what to do or say. He felt himself to be the victim of a cruel joke, yet he knew Dumbledore was not capable of this.

Dumbledore rose from the table, picked up the fallen chair, and gazed at him steadily saying, "Come, Remus, sit down and eat. You look as if you could do with a bit of something. And I cannot possibly finish all this myself." He smiled warmly and gestured at the food piled on the table. Woodenly, Remus crossed the room and resumed his seat. Dumbledore solicitously filled a tea cup.

"Milk? Sugar?" he clucked. After receiving no reply, he said, "Do try some of the pumpkin quince marmalade. Madame Pomfrey makes it, you know."

Remus merely sipped his tea and absently took another bite of his scone, chewing it doggedly but without interest. He stared intently at the plate for a few minutes, playing with the crumbs, and then looked up at Dumbledore.

"What is it that you-"

"That can wait until we have finished our tea" Dumbledore cut him off with a wave of his hand. "I notice you have a copy of Moreton's Railway Disasters of the Twentieth Century. Do you really believe his thesis that all railway accidents can be attributed to gremlins?"

"Well, he-" Remus began hesitantly, his mind not able to change

subjects so quickly. He searched the table for milk, located the pot and poured some into his tea.

"No. I don't," he answered finally with some animation, "He knows far more about steam engines than he does about gremlins. Gremlins generally prefer to cause the greatest amount of harm by making the smallest possible part fail. And most gremlins like to work in darkness or at least in rainy weather. A great many accidents just don't fit - some have to be attributed to Muggle error or pure chance."

"Do try one of these teacakes," interjected Dumbledore, holding a dish in front of Lupin, "The kitchens put the most interesting little bits of things in the center." After Remus had chosen one, somewhat reluctantly, Dumbledore put down the plate and continued, "Of course, Moreton contends that the influx of gremlins from east Asia is partly responsible."

Remus shook his head vigorously while biting into the teacake. Dumbledore was right. The center was interesting, although so chewy that it was a full minute before he could speak.

After washing it down with a large swallow of tea, he said "Moreton uses a confusing and erroneous argument: it is sunny in India; there are railways in India; gremlins cause accidents on railways. However, it does not follow from this that Indian gremlins cause railway accidents in Britain when it is sunny."

"In fact," he continued as he helped himself to a slice of ham, "Native gremlins want nothing to do with foreigners and don't even let them on the trains. Indian gremlins are most likely to be found on the docks, causing cranes to drop crates and so forth."

"There really is quite a lot of confusion about non-native magical creatures," Dumbledore sighed as he took off his spectacles and polished them on his robe.

"Textbooks either ignore them or publish hearsay and rumors," Remus relied, gesturing with his knife, "And some of these foreign --er-- immigrants are quite powerful and capable of causing a lot of harm."

Dumbledore regarded Lupin placidly as he continued to polish his spectacles and said, "A more up-to-date text would be helpful, don't you think?"

"Is that the job, then," Remus inquired curiously, his voice taking on an unintended mocking tone, "writing a textbook?"

"No," replied Dumbledore thoughtfully, tapping his spectacles gently against his cheek, "This had not occurred to me until now. However, a good text could provide a modest income...you might think about this, Remus."

Remus merely look baffled, intrigued by the possibility and even more curious as to the real reason Dumbledore had come.

"I believe," continued Dumbledore as he set his spectacles back on his nose, "that Madame Pince has a cousin or brother in the publishing business, at Hingus & McNeil." Dumbledore named the most

prominent wizard publishing house. "I shall speak to her about this when I get back."

"But that's not what you came to talk about," Remus stated flatly, fighting to keep both curiosity and fear out of his voice.

"No, indeed," replied Dumbledore as he rose from the table and strode to the center of the room, the hem of his robe swirling over the designs on the rug. "A magnificent rug," he continued, "Has it been in your family long?"

"What?" Remus stared up at Dumbledore blankly, caught off balance again.

"The runes are Norse and very old, but the dragons appear to be Welsh Greens. Most unusual."

"It belonged to my grandfather, I suppose. He was Welsh - from around here."

Remus stared at the rug, slowly rising from his chair and circling it. The inner part of the rug was arrayed with a phalanx of Welsh Green dragons in various poses. Around the outside ran a border patterned in green and black. He looked at the black runes woven skillfully into the forest green border as if seeing them for the first time.

As a boy, he played on the rug, sitting for hours with his toy figures arranged carefully in mock battles. The border of the rug was the highway, the castle, or a wall of thorns. Inside, the dancing green dragons menaced his knights, were their prisoners, or occasionally befriended them, telling them magical secrets. When he got older, he was allowed to enchant his toy soldiers and they marched smartly in parade along the border.

Now, squatting down, he ran his hand over that same border. The black characters formed words that hung just out of reach, like the moon covered in clouds whose face contains a secret. He felt the shape of a word, but not the meaning. His eyes closed involuntarily, but the runes remained visible, writhing in his mind, fighting to be free of obscuring haze. Suddenly, as when a rent appears in clouds causing the moon to spring forth, the runes blazed brightly and painfully. He put up an arm to shield his face although his eyes were tightly shut.

"_Krakosgard_," he whispered and the runes vanished, leaving his mind clear but confused.

"What-" he stuttered as he opened his eyes, looking up until he met Dumbledore's steady blue gaze regarding him with concern and wonder. "Wh-what does that mean?"

"Dragonkeeper. An old Norse word for the men who tamed the great dragons of the north."

"I don't understand," Remus said slowly as he stood, ran his hand through his thick gray hair and began pacing the length of the small room.

Dumbledore stroked his beard, not taking his bright blue eyes from

Lupin's moving form.

"Nor do I, just yet," he said thoughtfully, "This bears on my reason for coming, although I am uncertain as to how." He paused and looked down for a moment, searching his memory. "Cadwynddraig. That would be the Welsh word."

"My grandfather's name..." Remus said turning around with a start, "He was my mother's father."

"It is possible," Dumbledore ruminated as he stared down at the rug, but seemed to be seeing something much farther away, "that your family have been dragonkeepers. At one time, powerful wizards possessed dragons for their personal use. Dragonkeepers, it is said, could talk to dragons and would have been valued, particularly for taming the larger ones such as Ridgebacks and Horntails. There were quite a few wizards' castles in the mountains of Wales, too."

"Dragons have been outlawed in the British Isles for hundreds of years!"

"Officially since 1709," replied Dumbledore. "Dragons can be employed with permission of the Ministry. Gringotts uses them to guard its vaults, but, in general, the keeping of dragons by wizards is forbidden. So many wizards have used dragons for evil, although I do not believe that dragons themselves are inherently evil. There are still a few native species, like the Welsh Green, of course, but they are small and rather harmless. The larger dragons vanished from Britain...until very recently."

Dumbledore's last words hung in the air. Remus felt his pulse quicken. There was no reason that this should mean anything to him. The rug had been in his family, but what did that signify? What if some long dead ancestor had kept dragons? And yet his heart raced and he felt a terrifying curiosity.

"And what does that have to do with me?" Remus cried sharply, turning away from Dumbledore and leaning heavily on the desk. "Did you come to find the last surviving dragonkeeper in Britain? Is this the job? Really, Dumbledore, your misplaced charity astounds me. I can't even hold down a teaching job, let alone--"

He swept his hand across the desk and a cascade of parchment spilled to the floor. He saw his words flowing over the pages, jumbled and roiling like a torrent of water plummeting through a rocky cleft to be dashed into insensibility on the stones below. He stooped to pick up pieces of parchment. Dumbledore appeared at his side, helping him gather the scattered papers. Remus stood up suddenly and flung an armful of parchment at the desk. He turned quickly, jerked open the door and was gone.

Dumbledore found him outside, standing with his forehead pressed against the wall of the cabin where the chimney curved around to meet the clapboards. One hand lay on the shingles while the other caressed stone, as if asking the cabin itself to give up its secrets, to reveal a history hitherto unsuspected.

"I have found more than I came looking for," Dumbledore said quietly as he regarded Lupin's still form, unmoving save for fingers playing

across rough stones. "I came looking for a wizard skilled in Defense Against the Dark Arts, someone who was not afraid of solitude and isolation, someone whom I could trust."

"Why come to me, then?" Remus said bitterly as he turned to face the old wizard. "I have betrayed your trust every time it's been given me."

"Perhaps you feel that you have failed yourself," Dumbledore replied gently, "but you have never failed me. You are a good man, Remus. Some day I hope that you have the courage to admit that to yourself."

"Tell me about this job, then," Remus snapped.

"A moment, please. Where did I...Oh, yes, here it is." Dumbledore muttered to himself as he fumbled through various pockets of his robe, at last producing a small gold object which he began to unwrap.

"Do have a piece of chocolate," he said holding out his hand to Lupin, "and I shall explain everything while you pack."

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\_Revised 4/25/01 to correct a few more things that nagged at me. The next chapter is called 'Night Flight.'\_

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## 2. Night Flight

Dragon's Glen: 2. Night Flight \*\*2. Night Flight\*\*  
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Sea. Wind. Moon. These were his companions on this peculiar journey toward an unknown country. He felt remote from them all: the black sea thousands of feet below, the roaring wind kept at bay by the bubble charm around his broomstick, and the newly-waned moon above, small and oddly insignificant this far from ground.

This morning I woke shivering under a pile of blankets in Wales, Remus thought, and now I'm shivering over the Irish Sea on a broomstick. Part of him rejoiced in the change of fortune, while another wondered whether this was a change for the better or just another opportunity for failure.

His gloved hands, already starting to cramp, gripped the handle of the broom tightly as he tried not to look down at the sea below, black and featureless since the shipping lanes of Liverpool had passed under him. Wind rushed past the invisible bubble that protected him, although the charm could not completely silence the fierce shrieking nor keep him entirely warm. Jewels shone on the queer instrument strapped to his wrist, pointing the way northward. On the horizon ahead, off to his left, he saw lights from the Isle of Man, winking faintly in the darkness as if the sea could catch stars the way it caught and reflected the lonely moon.

"Comin' up on the Isle of Man, guv'nor!"

Remus jerked out of his reverie, startled by the sudden noise, and briefly fought for control of the broomstick. Less than an hour into the journey, he already detested this so-called compass given to him by Dumbledore. Its enchanted jewels glowed, pointing him in the right direction, which was all he needed to find his way. However, the thing insisted on giving unsolicited advice and even geography lessons.

"The Isle of Man sits halfway 'tween England and Ireland, ten miles wide and twenty miles long," the compass intoned in its loud, high pitched whine. "The island is home to many unusual creatures 'cluding the tailless Manx cat, the four-horned Manx sheep, and the fire-breathing-

"How long until we're over land again?" Remus shouted above the chattering compass and the ever-present wind.

"Another twenty minutes, guv'," replied the compass smartly. "Bad news, though. Looks like we'll be headin' into a cloud bank 'afore then. Coverin' all of southern Scotland, it is."

What a shame that we won't be able to see a single landmark soon, Remus thought. He grimaced as he shifted his weight slightly, trying to get comfortable, if indeed that were possible. Flying in a cloud suited him for another reason; he would see neither the inky blackness below nor the luminous, grinning moon above.

How long had it been since he rode a broomstick? He hadn't owned one for many years, preferring to use anonymous Muggle transportation when he needed to get someplace.

Last September. He remembered how he hurried to the village, still clutching the letter from his mother's neighbor, and hastily borrowed a broomstick from Mr. Clunedd. Come quickly, the letter said, she may not have much time left. In truth, he did not remember the journey there at all, only the achingly slow flight back to the cabin, made even more isolated by her loss.

He had never liked flying. He might have avoided it altogether if not for the impromptu Quidditch games with his friends when he was at school. He was nowhere near good enough to be on the house team, but on weekends when the weather was fair, they often talked him into playing with them. He played Keeper since it involved the least amount of flying. However, he would just as soon have stayed on the ground.

James and Sirius, on the other hand, were in their element when aloft. James shot across the field like a cannon ball, and was capable of diving precisely to snare the Quaffle in the blink of an eye--a trick that often made crowds gasp in amazement during House games. Sirius, always a Beater on the Quidditch field, favored the reckless charge that sent the Bludger flying and made opponents zoom out of the way, scrambling to preserve life and limb.

Remus gripped the broom handle tighter still, remembering the skill and grace of James and Sirius, willing himself to enjoy the ride as they undoubtedly would have. It didn't help. Tears, useless tears, welled up inside and flooded his eyes, blinding him. So many that he

loved were gone.

"Clouds dead ahead, guv," the compass chimed.

A wall of white reached out, insubstantial arms about to enfold him. Remus shook his head and blinked to clear his eyes. Tendrils of thick mist flowed over the enchanted bubble like the arms of a powerful squid coursing through a murky ocean. The light soon failed and heavy, turbulent darkness - only faintly lit by the jeweled compass - swallowed him.

Where was Sirius now, he wondered. Dumbledore had given him hopeful news, more and better news than he'd heard in some time. He thought about Sirius often, trying not to remember the filthy and emaciated wreck of a man he had seen at Hogwarts, instead recalling the laughing Beater astride his broomstick or the daredevil crouched on the back of that flying motorcycle.

Dumbledore had given him much to think about concerning Sirius and other matters. As the formless mist flowed past, Remus tried to make sense of all that he had learned.

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"And you really believe that I can help you?" Remus asked as he cleared dishes from the table, directing the plates, cups, and utensils into a tub on the floor. As he waved his wand and they began washing themselves, he mused that the contents of the tub represented about a week's worth of dishes in his usual solitary existence.

Dumbledore did not answer him immediately as he searched for something inside his large purple cloak, standing stiff and upright as a tent next to the door. He emerged like a general ready to plan a campaign on the battlefield, clutching a piece of parchment and a couple of leather bundles.

"My dear boy," he said as he deposited his burdens on the table, "you were the first person to come to mind when this business came up."

Intrigued, Remus sat down and watched Dumbledore uncover one of the items, something wrapped in what looked like dragonskin. The old wizard's long, thin fingers danced over the leathery folds, moving aside to reveal a flat, reddish oval, roughly petal-shaped and about the size of a large man's hand.

With a swift glance at Dumbledore, Remus stretched out his hand and lightly ran his fingers over the surface. At first touch, it felt cool, smooth, and featureless. As his fingers lingered, he felt it grow warm and saw swirling patterns of fine lines emerge in looping whorls like the fingerprints of a giant. With a sharp intake of breath, he withdrew his hand quickly. Dumbledore said nothing, expecting him to speak.

"I am no expert," Remus began haltingly, "but this appears to be a scale from a dragon." He looked quizzically at the old wizard who

nodded for him to continue. "But, Dumbledore, this is enormous!" Remus protested. "The dragons of Wales or the Hebrides, even a full grown Norwegian Ridgeback, don't have scales this big, do they?"

Dumbledore shook his head, although his blue eyes twinkled in amusement. "There are other larger dragons, do not forget. I have my suspicions as to its identity. However, I just came by this extraordinary object yesterday and have not had time to consult the library at Hogwarts." He paused thoughtfully. "And I do not wish to confer with the experts at the Ministry, not yet."

"This pattern," Remus said slowly as he touched the scale and the flowing lines came alive under his fingertips, "is quite distinctive. Can't you identify it?"

"Ah, that pattern is most interesting," Dumbledore chuckled. "However, it is unfamiliar to me, and I am afraid that I was not able to call it forth myself."

Remus stared at the scale for a minute and then got up. "Hang on," he said, "I may have a book about dragons here, although I haven't seen it in a while."

He paced in front of the bookshelves, searching the jumble of books in the fading light. Outside the sun had sunk behind the trees, leaving fence and forest in shadow, while the interior of the cabin fell rapidly into darkness. Remus strode to the desk and impatiently lit a candle with a flick of his wand. Holding the candlestick aloft, he continued his search. With a soft exclamation of triumph, he pulled out a worn volume and returned to set both book and candlestick on the table.

"This was from my mother's shop. I sold most of the books after she died, but I kept a few. This one, in particular, I seem to remember belonging to my grandfather. A Catalogue of Dragons by Magnus Cadwynddraig," he read from the cover. "I'd thought to translate it into English at some point, but haven't even got round to opening it yet."

"\_\_It might prove useful," Dumbledore mused as he turned the book over in his hands, "but it is locked." He pushed the volume toward Remus who tried in vain to make the book open with his wand, attempting a series of unsuccessful spells.

"Some books can only be opened by the right person, some by using a key." Dumbledore looked at Remus and then at the dragon's scale, softly shining in the flickering candlelight. "Or by using a particular object."

"Yes. Perhaps," murmured Remus, picking up the scale delicately with both hands barely touching the edges. He held it uncertainly for a moment and then gently set it down on top of the book.

The book began to quiver and uttered a loud snap. He removed the scale just as the book sprang open of its own accord. Pages turned, releasing puffs of dust that sparked and crackled in the candle flame, broadcasting exotic scents from far off lands. In a moment, the book lay still, open to a page of creased parchment containing a bold and flowing script written in red ink. Just how old was the



book, he wondered, and was it really written by an ancestor? These questions soon left his head, however, as he began to read aloud, translating from the Latin as he went along.

\_The Red Dragon of Kirghiz at one time made its home in the mountains of southwestern China. This Dragon is not, as many wizards suppose, a native of that region. The wizard Yang Wang-fu was given the task of breeding a superior dragon for the Empress Wu in the seventh century. According to records kept by the monks, Yang labored for ten years in a remote monastery in the mountains, attempting many breeding experiments. His most successful crossbreed was between the Liondragon and the Ironbelly, to produce what became known thereafter as the Red Dragon. Only the monks called it Yang's Big Mistake after a Dragon landed on the roof of the monastery and crushed it. A Red Dragon was brought to the court of Empress Wu, but did not remain there long because of its fondness for devouring courtiers and its prediction that the Empress would be overthrown the following year. Wang left the Imperial Palace in disgrace and returned to the mountains where he turned loose all the Red Dragons he had bred. The monks began a ten-year prayer cycle to commemorate what was for them a joyous event.\_

\_\_"Simply astonishing," cried Dumbledore with delight. "I thought Red Dragons were extinct, but this turn of events suggests otherwise. Pray, continue."

\_ The Red Dragon may be known by its scales, which are the color of burnished copper. This Dragon may be distinguished from the slightly smaller Liondragon by its claws, horns and spines, which are a deep red, such as the color of blood which flows freely, and by its snout, which is more elongated. When fully grown, the Red Dragon may attain the weight of four bulls and the length of the beast may equal five draught horses standing nose to tail. In flight, the span of a single wing is greater than forty hands. \_

"Well, that explains the size of the scale," Remus remarked. "And the weight would be about four tonnes, if I calculate correctly. Is this accurate? Are these dragons really so big?"

"They were said to be the largest, except perhaps for the Ukranian Ironbelly," replied Dumbledore. "Of course, there have been no reliable sightings of a Red Dragon in..." He paused as he searched his memory, "It may very well be that the last known sighting took place almost three hundred years ago in Britain. This is most curious."

Remus waited for some further explanation, but Dumbledore merely waved a hand for him to continue.

\_ The Mongol conquests took a toll on the number of Red Dragons since many wizards sought them out for magical purposes. As with all Dragons, the blood is commonly known to be valuable. Furthermore, the eggs, claws, horns, and saliva of this beast are reputed to produce powerful effects. In the fourteenth century Chu Yuan-Chang, later the Hung Wu Emperor, was said to have conquered and subjugated all of Mongolia by the use of a carbuncle. \_

\_\_"A carbuncle?" Remus puzzled. "Have I translated that correctly? It is a jewel, but what has that got to do with the dragon?"

"The carbuncle," replied Dumbledore soberly, "is obtained from the brain of certain dragons and is the source of enormous power to those who know how to wield it. If taken from a living creature, the carbuncle hardens into a red gem. For this reason, a wizard must cut the head off the dragon while it lives. That is why some wizards attempt the nearly impossible feat of sneaking into a dragon's lair. And why a true carbuncle is rare. I know of only one in this century."

For a moment, Remus could only stare wordlessly at the old wizard, unable to absorb what he had heard and read because it seemed too fantastic. If it weren't for the object--apparently a dragon's scale--lying on the table between them and glowing warmly in the candlelight, he might have dismissed Dumbledore's words, the book, even the rug as absurd coincidences. Almost without thought, he put his hand out and gingerly ran his fingertips along one edge of the scale, relishing the warmth which greeted him like a lover's kiss.

"Is there more, Remus?" Dumbledore broke the silence.

"Oh, yes." Hastily he withdrew his hand and attempted to gather his scattered thoughts. "There's a bit more."

Numerous Red Dragons inhabited the high passes of the mountains of Kirghiz for many centuries. This Dragon prefers to live in the company of others of its kind in groups of three to five. Its appetite for humans has been documented on numerous occasions, but sheep and goats form the bulk of its diet. Unlike the other eastern Dragon, the Red Dragon can communicate with its fellows over long distance without the need for speech. It is said that some wizards can understand the speech of Red Dragons, although whether this be with the aid of Dark Magic is not known.

Remus sat back in his chair, withdrew his hands into his lap, and said nothing for some moments. He shivered and realized that the fire had died out. Taking up his wand, he stood and faced the fireplace, crying softly "Incendio." With a sudden whoosh like the beating of enormous wings, the fire sprang to life and began to crackle merrily. He seemed unable to get warm as he stood facing the fire and rubbing his hands to drive out the chill.

"Is this the only evidence, then?" he asked as he turned to face Dumbledore, gesturing toward what lay on the table. "Have you actually seen a dragon?"

Dumbledore sighed. "A shepherd has seen something which frightened him, although he is not terribly articulate, I'm afraid. He has also unaccountably lost several sheep recently which I take as further evidence."

Impatiently, Remus rose and began to pace about the small cabin. He felt suddenly weary, conscious of the transformation he had undergone only that morning and wishing irrationally that Dumbledore would leave him alone. He stopped and rubbed his eyes in an attempt to drive away the numbing fatigue. Looking down in the dim light, he saw the dragons on the rug. A few hours ago, they were merely pleasant memories of childhood; now he was not sure what they meant.

"This is all very interesting, fascinating really." He shook his head

and looked back toward the old wizard seated at the table. "But I still don't see what it has to do with me. It should be obvious that I'm no expert on dragons, regardless of my family history."

Dumbledore did not answer at once, but sat with hands folded before him like a steeple, his chin resting on his fingertips.

"Let us suppose for a moment," he began, "that a dragon, a Red Dragon, appeared somewhere in Britain. What would happen?"

"Well, lots of wizards would be interested. Of course, Muggles would have to be kept away, but the Ministry would do that."

"The Ministry, I'm afraid, is still riddled with Voldemort's supporters," Dumbledore sighed wearily. "You may have heard that he has been quite active in recent years and many of his former followers have gone back to his side. I suspect that more are merely waiting for him to gain the upper hand before they declare themselves openly." He gestured at the object lying before them. "This represents great power that could be delivered to Voldemort by one of his servants. Therefore, I wish to be very cautious about informing the Ministry. You are the only one who knows of this, so far."

Remus drew toward the table, eyes fixed on the scale and dumbstruck by the implications of Dumbledore's words. As he stroked the ruddy surface once again, he began to see the great danger it symbolized.

"Tell me what I can do," he said simply, meeting Dumbledore's steady gaze.

"A cup of tea will do nicely, for a start," Dumbledore declared as he sprang up, clapping his hands together with obvious glee. "Let us warm up a bit. I still have much to tell you."

Remus grinned as he made for the kettle. It was no use expecting a straightforward answer from Albus Dumbledore; he should know that by now. He got the tea things out once again. It was going to be a long and interesting night.

Dumbledore carefully wrapped the scale and put it away. When Remus returned to the table with teapot, cups, milk and sugar, he saw that Dumbledore had spread a map of Britain in the center of the table.

"It is fortunate," said Dumbledore, pointing to northern Scotland, "that the place in which I found the, er, evidence is unknown to most in our world, including you. First, I must tell you a little of its history."

Remus poured tea for them both. As he sat down, he continued to stare at the map, trying to recall anything at all about the northern Highlands to which Dumbledore pointed. He knew that Dornoch, a town on the nearby coast, was the site of the last witch burning in Scotland, in 1722. The so-called witch was accused of turning her daughter into a pony, as he recalled, and having it shod by the Devil. The things that Muggles believed truly amazed him. It was lucky that they did not know what Dark wizards were really like.

"Thank you, my boy," said Dumbledore, noticing the cup of tea. He extracted two objects from a leather pouch: one looked like a large watch on a leather strap with jewels set around the central crystal; the other was a flat circle of glass about the size of a saucer. When Dumbledore laid the piece of glass on the map, Remus could see the details magnified. No, that was wrong. Looking more closely, he saw within the glass a tiny scene of snow-capped mountains surrounding a sparkling lake.

"Glen Draich." Dumbledore began. "That is a very recent name for it. I suspect that wizards have had a name for this glen for many thousands of years, for it is one of those places of power that calls to our kind. There is an ancient circle of standing stones here." A tiny red light winked next to the little lake as he said this. "However, I know only the modern history of this place." He took a sip of his tea and then clucked to himself for forgetting the milk. After pouring in a bit of milk and stirring his tea, he continued.

"Power can, of course, be used for good or for evil. Glen Draich has often attracted wizards who wished to call forth Dark Magic with some very tragic consequences. Three hundred years ago a wizard called Dugald built a castle here." Another tiny light blinked. "The ruins are still standing. It is said that Dugald tamed a dragon and used the beast to terrorize the local wizards. One clan refused to submit to him and was almost entirely destroyed. Sadly, it was some time before Dugald's crimes were discovered. The Highlands were remote and lawless in those days. I believe that it was largely on account of Dugald that the Warlock's Convention outlawed dragons in 1709. After that, he was hunted down and driven out of Glen Draich."

"I certainly never learned any of this in school," Remus remarked as he sipped his tea, noticing that it had gone stone cold.

"There is surprisingly little written about Dugald," Dumbledore replied thoughtfully. "Perhaps he was kept out of the history books because of the nature of his crimes. I don't know. I have searched many libraries, in any case, and found little. I do know that Dugald's dragon was very large and supposedly red in color." Here he paused and seemed to have difficulty choosing his words. "Coincidence seems unlikely. Dragons are, in some ways, akin to us. Perhaps they, too, can sense the power of the glen."

He shook his head and sighed. "But I am getting ahead of myself. I come into this story about fifty--no, almost sixty--years ago. A group of us were hunting a particularly nasty wizard who, like Dugald before him, had committed terrible crimes against both wizards and Muggles. At Glen Draich, I discovered he had been preparing for something even more--I shall not go into the details," Dumbledore paused and looked unusually grim, "or otherwise we will be here all night. However, he was defeated in the end."

The memory of it seemed to tire Dumbledore. He stared into his tea cup for a few moments, looking as old as he probably was. Then he managed to smile faintly and shake off the gloom.

"Where was I? Yes. It was obvious to me that Glen Draich should be watched, if not guarded, to prevent others from using its power to cause harm. But there was a war going on at the time. The Ministry

had its hands full trying to keep the poor Muggles safe from those of our kind who tried to profit from the chaos of war. There were also a lot of magical creatures to be cared for, displaced from war zones in Europe and sent to England for safekeeping. With the permission of The Abernethy, Glen Draich was set aside as a kind of sanctuary for injured and endangered magical creatures."

"The Abernethy?" queried Remus.

"Dear me," answered Dumbledore, "I have not explained this properly at all. Glen Draich, indeed all of Strathdraich forest, rightly belong to The Abernethy, the only remnant of Clan Abernethy, which the wizard Dugald attempted to destroy. Perhaps even more than myself, he wished to prevent further mischief. Once the Sanctuary was created, the Ministry was willing to take some measures to conceal its existence, although not as many as I would have liked."

"And this continues?" Remus asked in fascination.

"Oh, yes. Currently, Glen Draich is home to a number of creatures from eastern Europe and Africa, put in danger by other Muggle wars. I still sit on the committee that governs the Sanctuary. I was there yesterday to look the place over. Angus was quite upset about losing so many sheep, although I could get little from him which was coherent."

Remus looked puzzled, but before he could form the question, Dumbledore continued. "Angus lives at the glen as a sort of caretaker. He's not terribly bright, but loyal and capable with animals. He had seen something, that much was obvious. As I said before, he could not tell me much more than something had taken several sheep over the course of a few weeks. In any event, I found the scale and realized what it meant. I am now convinced that a Red Dragon has taken up residence in Glen Draich, although I am at a loss to explain the reason why."

"How do you think that I can help, then?" Remus asked, struggling to keep his mind afloat amidst the flood of details washing around him, threatening to drown him.

"Isn't it obvious?" Dumbledore replied shortly, then he laughed and seemed to recollect himself. "Forgive me, Remus. The Ministry must be told of this, of course, and soon. We must confirm the identity of the dragon and, if it really is a Kirghiz Red, send someone off to central Asia to investigate."

"I don't think that I can help there," Remus protested.

"No, of course not. I had Charlie Weasley in mind for that task. While inquiries are being made, it will be necessary to safeguard the glen. I suspect that word will leak out, no matter how much the Ministry tries to keep it secret. As I have already said, I do not know whom to trust within the Ministry. But I trust you, Remus.

"I am no servant of Voldemort," he replied, smiling and running his hand through his hair, "That much is true."

"You sell yourself short," Dumbledore chortled. "You know the Dark Arts thoroughly and your warding spells are as strong as any I know. You proved that to me today."

Remus rose and wandered distractedly about the room. His gaze came to rest on the jumble of parchment rolls atop the desk, the collection of all that he knew about the Dark Arts.

"When do you want me to start?"

"The committee will meet tomorrow at Strathdraich Lodge," Dumbledore said. "I would like you there to assist me. That will mean going up tonight, I'm afraid. I trust that you are not too tired."

"I'll manage," Remus replied, heading for the tiny bedroom. "At least I'm well fed."

He took out an old leather valise and set it on the bed. From a wooden chest, he got what little clothing he owned and packed it in short order. At the bottom of the chest lay his black wizard's robes. He supposed that he would need it for the meeting of this committee. As he shook the robe, several moths fluttered out, making him realize that he had forgotten to use a preserving charm when he put it away. I'll have some mending to do tomorrow, he sighed inwardly. The last time he had worn the robe was at Hogwarts three years earlier. Some of these memories still brought him pain, although there were some pleasant recollections as well.

"Albus," he asked, standing in the doorway and hugging the folded robe to his chest, "How is Harry getting along? It's his sixth year now, isn't it?"

Dumbledore looked up from the map and a smile came to his lips. "He does manage to learn a bit each year, although his capacity for getting into trouble may exceed his father's. Potter and Weasley seem to give Mr. Filch as much trouble as Potter and Black did in your day."

"And Her-Miss Granger?"

"I expect Miss Granger will be Head Girl next year," Dumbledore clucked. "Minerva hopes she will stay on and teach."

Remus remembered the trio fondly, thinking of their courage and loyalty to one another. I hope they can remain friends for a good long while and that nothing comes between them, he thought as he stuffed the robe into the valise. There was still room left even though it contained all of his clothing. He took it to the desk, figuring that he could at least bring the hodgepodge of notes. He might actually make some progress on organizing it into a book.

"Would you have parchment and a pen?" Dumbledore asked. "I need to send off a few owls before we leave."

Remus found several clean sheets of parchment and brought these to the table with quill and ink. He picked up the book that lay there, turning it over in his hands curiously. He would bring this, too, for he might want to read more about dragons. He placed the book in the valise, closing it with a snap. There was still one question nagging him.

"Albus," he said with hesitation, "Is it really true about Sirius?"

That his name has been cleared, I mean. I've not heard from him in ..." He stopped, unable to continue. Dumbledore looked up and regarded him kindly.

Sirius had been on the run, still considered a dangerous escaped murderer, when he left Hogwarts three years before. The real story of the deaths of James and Lily Potter - and the supposed death of Peter Pettigrew - was known only to himself and Dumbledore and to Harry and his friends. But the testimony of schoolchildren and a werewolf would hardly convince anyone.

Upon leaving Hogwarts, Remus had gone to Bickenham, the little village where Sirius' mother still lived, to tell all that he knew, to reassure her that her son was not a cold-blooded killer. He was already forming a plan to make for the cabin in Wales and told them so. Not long after he arrived there, he received an owl from Sirius. The message was brief but coherent, giving few details of his whereabouts lest it fall into the wrong hands.

After that, messages came sporadically. Twice Sirius appeared at the cabin. Two years earlier, he arrived sick and wounded, staying only long enough to get back on his feet because he did not want to put Remus in danger, he said. The previous summer, Sirius turned up on the eve of the full moon and for one glorious night Padfoot ran with the wolf again.

Since this last visit, Remus had received no messages. By winter he was worried. Then he happened to see a week-old copy of the Daily Prophet wrapped around a loaf of bread, bought on one of his infrequent trips to the village.

'Black Found Innocent' the headline screamed. Remus could hardly believe it. Certain facts had come to light, the article explained, causing the Ministry to re-open the case. There was a picture of Sirius taken in front of the Ministry, looking healthier than he had in a long while but unexpectedly grim. The end of the article was missing, presumably wrapped around some other loaf of bread. Later on he asked various people in the village, but each story he heard seemed to be different. In the end, Remus did not know what to believe.

"Extraordinary circumstances, really," beamed Dumbledore, "Yes, the Ministry finally knows the truth. Most of it, anyway."

"Then why haven't I heard from Sirius?" Remus cried impatiently. "Isn't he free?"

Dumbledore sighed and laid down his quill. "He was cleared of all charges, yes. But there were those in the Ministry who felt that he still might be dangerous." His bright blue eyes held a hint of sadness. "To many people, his actions fifteen years ago and even three years ago were not those of an innocent man. There are still rumors that he used Dark Magic to escape from Azkaban."

"But that is all in the past!" Remus protested, gripping the back of the empty chair for support. "And Sirius is innocent!"

"Then there was the matter," Dumbledore seemed to be choosing his words carefully, "Of his behavior at the inquiry."

"Oh, no. Don't tell me," Remus winced as he sat down roughly in the chair. "That temper of his."

"There was an unfortunate outburst..."

"Was Severus there? Did he have something to do with this?" Remus asked sharply.

"Severus gave testimony, yes. I'm afraid that Sirius found some of it, er, provocative."

"You mean slanderous?" Remus sighed deeply. "I wish I had been there."

"Perhaps you would have been able to restrain Sirius. In any case, the judgement of the board of inquiry was that he should perform service to the community. Eighteen months of probation."

"Probation? They took his wand away?" Dumbledore nodded in response. "Where is he, Albus?"

"I arranged a situation for him that will not be too unpleasant, I believe. Perhaps he will begin to heal himself as well."

"Can he receive mail? Can I write to him?" Remus asked with excitement. Dumbledore nodded and Remus, feeling happier than he had been in many months, sprang up and dragged his chair to the desk.

He was finishing his hurried letter when something thumped softly against the door. There was another thump and the sound of scratching. Remus opened the door and found two large owls, looking quite annoyed as they marched importantly into the room and hopped onto the table. Dumbledore attached his messages and sent them off. He took the letter which Remus handed him, promising to deliver it to Sirius in person.

"It is time to be off," he bustled, going to his cloak again and returning with a broomstick. Remus was no longer surprised by anything that Dumbledore produced from that great purple cloak. "I know that you are tired," he said as he handed it to Remus, "but one cannot Apparate to Strathdraich Lodge, owing to some of the magical protections we have put in place."

"Couldn't I catch a Knight Bus from the village?" Remus protested weakly.

"Secrecy is vital just now," replied Dumbledore, eyeing him sharply. "You have not forgotten how to ride a broom, I trust."

Remus sighed and shook his head as Dumbledore got out his wand.

"This compass will guide you," Dumbledore continued as he tapped the jeweled instrument on the table. He drew his wand along the map from their present location in the north of Wales to northern Scotland, leaving a glowing red trail on the parchment. He set the compass on the middle of the bright line which shrank to nothing even as the jewels of the compass began to pulse a brilliant red color.



"You're not going?" Remus asked as Dumbledore handed him the compass.

"I'm off to London tonight," Dumbledore answered, going again to the cloak to put away the map. "There are certain matters I must arrange. I will see you there tomorrow at midday, if all goes well."

Dumbledore flicked his wand and the cloak settled about his shoulders. He seemed ready to depart but stopped himself, searching inside the cloak for one final thing.

"Do dress warmly," Dumbledore said solicitously as he pulled out a pair of fuzzy purple earmuffs and handed them to Remus. "I find that these are marvelous for long flights."

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"Bloody idiot! Stupid git!" shrieked the compass. "Dive! Dive, you friggin' moron!"

The words finally made sense to Remus who realized the compass had been screaming for some time. Through the heavy fog, he saw a faint glow ahead, pulsing hypnotically and growing ominously larger.

His stomach knotted painfully, almost paralyzing him, but he managed to point the broomstick down somehow. He felt himself plummet toward earth as the light grew brighter and a dull rumble shook his entire body. A dark shape passed overhead like a leviathan in the deepest ocean.

"Pull up! Level out!" shouted the compass, which had not stopped howling at him for an instant.

When he complied and managed to right the broomstick, it fell silent at last. He gasped convulsively, his chattering teeth making it difficult to breathe. He had no idea where he was; perhaps he had dozed off in the dense darkness of the cloud.

"Wh-what was that?" he stuttered at last, exhaling raggedly.

"That was a great bloody Muggle airplane," growled the compass, "You was flyin' into the approach to bloody Glasgow friggin' airport. You been sleepin'? Dinnit you hear?"

"Yeah. I must have been sleeping," Remus replied in a considerably calmer tone. "Any more airplanes I should know about?"

"Pay 'tention this time, guv," the compass grumbled, "And you may get out alive. "

The compass proceeded to guide him through a series of maneuvers: up, down, and sideways. It seemed to know what lurked in the fog at some distance away, because Remus did not see lights again. Surprisingly, he found himself enjoying the ride. Anxiety turned to exhilaration. This isn't so bad, he thought, I still might be able to hold my own on a Quidditch field.

After a few minutes, the compass ceased barking instructions and informed him that the clouds were breaking up ahead. Soon the viscous fog grew thinner and he glimpsed dark patches of ground; wisps of clouds flowed beneath him like a swift river.

Remus remembered James on the Quidditch field again. Instead of mourning the loss, however, he thought of Harry who flew with all the courage and daring of his father. Harry would continue to play the game and someday Sirius would fly astride the Shadow once more.

As the Highlands swelled below him, he flew on. The dark sky glowed with more stars than he could ever imagine and with the baleful moon. He laughed out loud. Tonight the moon was just another decoration for the heavens. Nothing more.

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\_I hope you didn't mind the long digression about Sirius. Remus really wanted to know. Obviously, I have avoided explaining how Sirius Black's name is cleared. I suspect that J K Rowling will do a wonderful job of this at some point, so I didn't attempt it within this story. I hope to have more to say about Sirius in a later story, though. I am very grateful to Blaise for sharing research on Scottish history and for much, much more.\_

\_Revised 4/25/01 to update the dragon lore.\_

\_Revised 3/18/00 to correct a few minor bits.\_

\_Revised 2/14/01 to correct a few things that bothered me; note that this tale was begun long before Book 4 was released and certain parts will continue to be inconsistent with Book 4 and subsequent books. I hope you enjoy it anyway!\_

\_ - CLS \_

### 3. Morning Fog

Dragon's Glen 3. Morning Fog  
><br>

"Och! These holes need mending. The poor lad!"

Fog filled his dreams. He stirred, for it almost seemed as if someone had spoken. Afraid that the endless fog would fill the waking world as well the dream world, he resisted opening his eyes.

"A wee book about dragons!"

No mistaking it this time. He heard a person or persons speaking, and with a heavy Scottish accent besides. He became aware of rustling noises, the sound of cloth swishing and of papers softly crackling. Slowly, as if coming out of a cloud, he remembered that he had completed his journey to Strathdraich Lodge late the previous night, somehow stumbling to the bed that the innkeeper had made up for him.

"None of that looking at pictures, my lad. Get back to putting them

papers away."

He felt the crisp linen sheet and rough wool blanket against his cheek, so different from the soft worn sheets and quilt back in Wales, and tried to banish the lingering image of the cloud's center by thinking of the moon sparkling up at him from black water as he flew lower and lower, coming to rest at one end of a long finger of a lake. Loch, he corrected himself. He was in Scotland, after all.

Remus opened his eyes enough to take in the room with as little movement as possible. His muddled brain had not deceived him: there were two creatures moving about. Both had the form of men, but were only about three feet tall, topped with curly brown hair, and dressed in nondescript brown clothing. One was perched on a small table, squatting amid various pieces of parchment, probably his notes. The other stood at the open door of a large wooden wardrobe. Remus' clothing had been hung up and the little man was doing something to his robe.

"This here says that a Banshee appears only in the night. That's cracked! Have they never met Morag?"

"You should not be reading them things, but tidying up."

Taking in the rest of the room, Remus could see a bureau with a mirror and in the mirror's reflection, a tiny high window with plaid, starched curtains. Pictures, scenes of the Highlands he guessed, hung on the white walls of rough plaster. His wand lay on a small night stand next to the bed, he was gratified to see. Swiftly, he sat up and grabbed the wand, pointing it at the creature roosting on the table.

"You've seen a Banshee, have you?"

With a small cry of surprise, the little man hopped down to the floor and faced him defiantly, hands on hips. "Aye. That I have, sir, and I must say that your papers have got it wrong."

"Och, pay no attention," the other one replied hastily, frowning at his companion. "He's a bit too saucy for his own good, sir."

"You're Brownies, aren't you?" said Remus. He lowered his wand slightly and drew up his knees, wrapping one arm around his legs and staring in wonder. He noticed that even their skin was brown, the color of walnut shells, and their eyes, a dark, liquid chocolate. Both stared at him fixedly, one with frank curiosity and the other with a mixture of timidity and irritation.

"Gilleen, at your service, sir," said the saucy one, bowing low and then continuing rapidly, "About the Banshee--"

"Beatham, at your service, sir," the other said shortly, bowing not quite so low.

"I'm Remus Lupin. Pleased to meet you."

"I do apologize, sir, for this one's mouth." Beatham gave the other a little kick to silence him. "It oft' lands him in a kettle of trouble."

"Not at all," Remus grinned in reply. "I would like to hear more about the Banshee."

Gilleen seemed poised to hold forth at great length, but was interrupted by the sound of a knock. Remus glanced at the door, taking his eyes from the Brownies for an instant, and they vanished.

He threw back the covers and got out of bed slowly, still puzzling at the sight of the little brown creatures. His two shirts, one sweater, robes, and cloak hung in the wardrobe, looking somehow neater and, in the case of the cloak, less dusty. His boots had been polished, he noted, and rested on the wardrobe floor next to the empty valise. His hat, uncreased and clean for the first time in several years, stood stiffly at attention on the bureau. But no trousers. The knock came again.

"Just a minute," he called as he searched the rest of the small room, finding at last that his trousers had been neatly folded in one of the bureau drawers. He hopped on one foot to the door while pulling them on.

An older man stood at the door holding a ceramic pitcher and bowl. His bald head was as brown as the skin of an old onion. A beak-like nose jutted from his round face, throwing it out of balance. Dark, deep-set eyes held a momentary look of concern.

"Good morning, sir. I hope it's not too early to trouble you, but I heard voices. Did you sleep well?" he said hesitantly.

"Yes. Very well, thank you." Remus moved aside to let him enter. "Forgive me. I was very tired last night and I don't remember your name."

"MacDermott. Orrin MacDermott, sir." The man set the bowl on the bureau and poured steaming water from the pitcher into it as he spoke. "Professor Dumbledore said you might arrive late, Mr. Lupin, so I had everything made ready for you."

"Quite an extraordinary thing," Remus said, still musing over his encounter with the little men. "Brownies were in my room when I woke. I've heard of them, of course, and seen a few, but I've never spoken to one until now."

"They did not bother you, sir?" MacDermott seemed concerned as he laid a towel and face cloth on the bureau. He took a bar of soap from one of the pockets of his leather apron and set it down as well.

"Not at all," Remus replied with a gentle shake of his head. "I quite enjoyed talking with them."

MacDermott fussed with the items on the bureau for a moment, then said, "I don't allow them in the guest rooms normally, sir. The poor wee things do like to be helpful. But in the season--summer, that is--we have Muggles staying at the lodge. They seem to like the idea that we have a ghost, but I do not think they'd know what to make of our Brownies."

"Muggles stay here?" Remus felt quite fuzzy-headed and was having trouble making sense of so much that was new.

"Aye," MacDermott answered. "We're a bit isolated here, but a few come on walking tours and take in the castle ruin--Abernethy Castle, that is. You can see it from the front of the lodge, quarter of a mile up the loch. But," he bowed his head sadly, "not many wizards care to visit. Dreadful curses there be on the castle, e'en after hundreds of years. Muggles can't feel them, but for our kind...." He shuddered, then straightened up.

"And yet you remain here. How is it that--"

"Well, sir, I must see to a wee problem with the plumbing," said MacDermott. "Bathroom's just down the hall, but it's not in working order." He gestured at the items on the bureau. "You can wash up here. Go down to the kitchen and my daughter will make your breakfast."

"Have you heard from Professor Dumbledore today?"

"No, sir. He told me day before yesterday there'd be a meeting of the committee this afternoon. I expect he'll send word."

Remus nodded as MacDermott made his way out the door. He quickly washed, shaved, and finished dressing, deciding to leave his wizard's robes in the closet until the time for the meeting arrived. Along the short corridor were several more rooms and one that must be the bathroom, judging from the clanging and pounding coming from behind the door. He then found himself in the entry hall, which he remembered from last night, with its dark wood paneling and big stone fireplace in which flames cheerfully leapt and crackled.

He hadn't seen much when he'd arrived, so he took a detour through the massive wooden front door. Outside an almost monochromatic scene in shades of gray confronted him, not at all like the fertile and sustaining green of Wales. The sky was a mottled color, from white mist hiding the tops of the surrounding hills to darker tones overhead. The loch mirrored the sky, appearing calm on its shiny surface but seeming darker and more menacing underneath. The hills--mountains perhaps but he could not see their full height--had steep faces of granite covered in some places with last year's brown turf. Only the grass at his feet, a green carpet that rolled down to the shore, held some color, but that, too, seemed to fade into gray in the distance.

The lodge sat on a gentle slope about three hundred feet from the southern end of the long ribbon of water that stretched northward into the mist. The loch nestled in the bulky arms of hills that flowed down from the unseen mountains lurking in the mist. Grassy slopes ran down to meet the edge of the water. Large pieces of granite were strewn near the shore like a giant's toys carelessly discarded after play.

To his left, the sides of the hills were particularly steep and bare, reminiscent of the faces of colossal statues--whether grim guardians or stern judges, he could not tell as their expressions had been worn away by time and weather. He could make out several smaller glens punching through the cliffs, the result of small streams coming down from the mountains to feed the loch. He knew that the Sanctuary--the

mysterious place responsible for his presence at Strathdraich Lodge--lay up one of those glens, but he was having trouble reconciling the map he had seen briefly last night with the reality of the scene.

To his right, a stand of trees caught his eye and made him realize how few trees there were in this glen. He wondered whether this was because they had long ago been cut down or because the climate was too harsh. The clump of trees--dark firs and the bleached skeletons of a few towering deciduous trees--stood near the water's edge, a quarter of a mile distant. Through the trunks and branches he saw the jagged outlines of walls and at least one tower, made of the same gray granite and stretching up toward the hills like a small child reaching for her mother. Abernethy Castle, he assumed. He strained to make out details, but the more he tried, the blurrier his vision became, perhaps because of the curse lying on the castle.

The shriek of an eagle, diving toward the lake's surface startled him. His gaze was wrenched away from the ruins and toward the bird, now pulling out of its dive with something struggling in its talons. It shrieked again, with carnivorous joy, and vanished into the mist with its catch. His fingers flexed involuntarily, expecting to end in claws, perhaps.

For an instant, he felt the talons gripping flesh and knew the anticipation of tearing the victim apart. How many animals had the wolf eaten in this way? At least a few in his student days at Hogwarts, as reported by his friends who were Animagi. In fact, Wormtail had taken to eyeing Remus suspiciously even in human form because of his tendency to chase small animals during the full moon (and perhaps his instincts were correct there). Padfoot had refused to hunt with him then, too human and too squeamish to eat rats and squirrels, although Sirius had more recently confessed to losing his distaste for rats after many years in Azkaban.

The eagle had long since vanished, and its meal was doubtless eaten, when Remus returned from his reverie, chilled and hungry. He turned away from the loch and took in Strathdraich Lodge, a solid stone building (made out of the ubiquitous granite blocks, of course) that had been no more than a dark hulk with a single lighted window when he'd arrived. In the morning's gray light, the lodge had a gabled roof of dark slate with chimneys extending upward in several places. Small windows of what must be the guest rooms nestled in the stone walls and a larger mullioned window was set to the right of the door, indicating a public room. Smoke curled lazily from the larger chimneys, unhurriedly melting into the mist. At the far right-hand side was the largest chimney, located in the kitchen, no doubt. The promise of breakfast drew him back inside.

He stood warming his hands in front of the hall fire until his stiff fingers had some life in them. He'd only meant to step outside for a minute or two, but the chill that lay on him indicated that he'd been outside for longer. He could distinguish two different sets of banging noises as he rubbed his hands and stared into the flames: a bass tone, accompanied by thumps and the occasional low male voice came from behind him, while a more alto-sounding clatter of metal accompanied by snatches of soprano song drifted to his ears from the open door next to the fireplace.

Through that door he found a tap room, a dark and comfortable-looking

room with a small bar next to the mullioned window and a handful of little tables and worn leather chairs between the bar and the large stone fireplace. The singing had stopped, but had certainly come from the open door on the far side of the room.

Remus leaned against the door frame, taking in the large kitchen. The enormous fireplace opposite the door seemed large enough to roast a whole sheep, although a slightly more modern black cast iron stove squatted at one end of the room. Pots hung from racks; bowls and crockery filled the shelves, while on top of the long scrubbed wooden table in the center of the room was a metal pan that held a very large standing rib roast of beef. He didn't see the point in cooking it at all and was fantasizing about starting in on it straight away when a sharp voice interrupted his lustful thoughts.

"You'll be wanting breakfast, I suppose?" The speaker, who appeared to be a girl in her late teens or early twenties, had a cap of short black hair that curled around her ears and neck. Rows of tiny gold rings glinted from her ears--four or five pierced each one--reminding him of people that he'd seen on the London Underground. She had a prominent nose, but it did not overbalance her, as with the older MacDermott. Together with her full face and long neck, he had the impression of a graceful statue lurking beneath the last traces of adolescent baby fat. Her large, dark eyes regarded him steadily, waiting for an answer.

"Oh," Remus started, realizing that he had been gazing at the unroasted beef with a decided hunger. "Yes, I am rather...."

"Hrumph," she grunted as she reached for a skillet above her. "I got nothing better to do, except dress this roast, start the puddings, bake bread, then make up the rooms." As she spoke, she banged the skillet down on the stove. She wore black: not witch's robes, but black jeans and an oversized black tee-shirt that read "U2" in white letters and held the sullen faces of a rock band, if he remembered his Muggle culture correctly.

"I'm Remus Lupin, by the way," he said as he strolled over to the table. The roast glistened seductively.

"Eilidh," she snapped as she set a bowl of eggs on the table, shoving the roasting pan out of his reach. "Eilidh-bloody-MacDermott, otherwise known as the one and only slave around here."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

She looked up from cracking eggs, wiped her hands on her shirt, and appraised him critically, deciding if his offer was more than mere politeness.

"I'm not much of a cook," he confessed. "Washing up and starting fires are my best talents."

"Well," she stammered, casting about the room, "the fire in the oven needs to be lit so's I can start the bread baking." She pointed to a stack of firewood on the floor and, above it, a large metal door set into a brick face next to the open hearth. "My dad says we must have a wood fire, as it makes the crust better."

Remus nodded and ambled over to the woodpile, amused by her continued staring. The metal door opened with a creak to reveal a brick-lined oven. He got to work with his wand, directing pieces of wood to float inside and settle themselves in neat piles. The oven seemed cold and empty, as if it had been many months since it had seen a fire.

"Do you live here year round?" he asked.

"No, only my dad--a real nutter, he is," Eilidh laughed bitterly. "Mum always spent the winters with my Aunt Mazie in Inverness. I used to be at school to south, but... D'you want a bit of bacon with your eggs? Oh, and we have no bread as yet, but I can warm up scones from yesterday."

"That'll be fine and I'd prefer steak, if you've got it," he answered, still thinking about the rib roast, "not cooked too long, please."

"Aye, we've plenty of beef since my dad had most of a cow delivered," she sighed and poked the eggs, now sizzling in the skillet. "That'll be something to look forward to, cooking the whole frigging side of beef."

"Easgann Academy, is that where you went to school?" Remus guessed, trying to get her off the subject of servitude.

"Til last spring, aye. You know it?"

"You could say that," he replied easily. "I taught there for a term, though it was some time ago."

"Huh, must have been 'afore my time," she grunted and looked at him sharply, recalculating his age, no doubt. "Was Professor Eelsworth the Headmaster then, too? He must be about a thousand years old."

"I taught Care of Magical Creatures while Professor Alicanth was recovering from a close encounter with a unicorn and, yes, the Headmaster looked to be a thousand years old." Remus wondered if he, too, looked ancient to this girl who could not have been more than seventeen.

"Don't know if I'll see that place again," she mused, more to herself, as she covered the eggs on the stove and banged a second skillet down, then went off in search of a steak. "\_He\_ thinks schooling is great waste of time, but it's a sight better than slaving in this kitchen." She stopped short, poised to drop a thick steak into the skillet. "Oh, begging your pardon, I shouldn't be running on like this."

"School is an opportunity that shouldn't be missed," he said neutrally as he peered into the oven and prepared to light a fire. He believed what he said, yet knew that stepping into the larger world through the doorway of school could bring unexpected confusion and pain.

"Well, being a professor and all, you would say that," she grumbled and poked the sizzling steak viciously, "but my dad isn't--I wonder what century he's living in sometimes."

After Remus lit the fire and was satisfied that the wood was going to



burn down nicely to coals, he turned back to the center of the kitchen where Eilidh was sliding eggs onto a plate and frowning down at the dish.

"Do you think that you could--"she said slowly, meeting his eyes, "maybe put in a word about how schooling is important and all that..." She ducked her head quickly and looked away, swapping one pan for another on the stove with a loud clatter.

"Oh, never mind," she scowled as she lifted the steak with a fork and dropped it with a careless gesture onto the plate. "Won't do any bloody good. Like all the MacDermotts, I was born here and I'll probably die here, too."

"Ah, don't be too sure," Remus said gently, forgetting his hunger momentarily. "Life can hold a great many surprises." Wasn't he living proof of that? He sometimes thought that his capacity to be surprised might be exhausted, but life had a way of sneaking up on him, as the last twenty-four hours had shown. Of course, he could have refused Dumbledore's offer and stayed in his self-imposed exile in Wales, but he had come. Was it merely his debt to the old wizard, the realization that he had nothing more to lose, or something more?

"Strawberry jam okay?" She interrupted his wandering and well-traveled thoughts, yanking him abruptly back to the reality of the kitchen, and the steaming plate of steak and eggs.

He blinked and brought her face into focus, then nodded. As she spooned out thick globs of jam, she said wistfully, "I don't think life has a lot of surprises for me, except whether it'll be beef or mutton for dinner. I'll bet you've been places, though, even big cities like London."

He shrugged, but she only grew more animated, like a small child diving into a box of sweets. "Oooh, you have? I just knew it. London must be heaven, with all the shops and places to eat, and things to see. I'm dying to go there and see all of that."

It's just a city, he started to say, thinking about how big and noisy and dirty it was, how people refused to look at one another, how easy it was to be anonymous and then forgotten utterly. But he checked himself, not wanting to burden this girl with his own peculiar prejudices. He had said that life was full of surprises, after all.

"It's waiting for you to discover," he said kindly, "and I'm sure you will someday--after you finish school, that is."

"Hey there, girl," interrupted Orrin McDermott from the doorway, "quit your gabbing and let Mr. Lupin have his breakfast." He strode into the kitchen briskly, having changed from his plumbing clothes into robes of coarse, brown wool. "I do hope the girl has not been bothering you, sir," he addressed Remus. "She does have a way of going on when she should be working. And as for you--" His weathered face reddened and he jabbed a finger at Eilidh who flinched, but otherwise held her ground. "You should be properly dressed. I'll have none of this Muggle rubbish here, girl, when we have important wizards coming as guests. Get off and change into proper robes!"

She said nothing, although her face colored slightly and the look that she gave him as she swept out of the kitchen was sour enough to curdle milk. MacDermott didn't seem to notice as he fussed over the breakfast, picking up the plate and silverware and carrying them to a table in the tap room. He assured Remus that things would be set right shortly. For his part, Remus couldn't help but wonder if he fell into the class of 'important wizards' or whether MacDermott was just warming up for the arrival of the committee.

Such thoughts were driven out of his head as he attacked the steak, thinking of those spectacular feasts at Hogwarts in which all manner of amazing and delicious food appeared and where, for a short time, all things seemed within reach.

"I hope your breakfast is, er, satisfactory, sir," interrupted MacDermott hesitantly. He set a pot of tea on the table, then a cup and saucer.

Remus, mouth full of steak and head full of carnivorous thoughts, waved his knife vaguely toward the plate.

"And I do apologize for the girl," McDermott said, shaking his head. He sat opposite Remus and poured him a cup of tea. "She's a bit wild, I won't deny. Don't know where she gets these notions... but she'll be made to see some sense. Milk?"

Remus wondered just how MacDermott planned to make his daughter 'see some sense.' She would be better off finishing school and, when he'd taken the measure of the innkeeper, Remus resolved to argue her case. For now, he merely nodded toward the pitcher of milk.

"An owl from Professor Dumbledore just came," said MacDermott in a more businesslike tone. After pouring the milk, he took out several sheets of parchment from his robes and went on, "He says that he and the others will be coming up from London by three this afternoon."

"Two from the Ministry, yes," Remus said, "and The Abernethy will be coming, also, I suppose. Does he live around here?"

"Him?" the innkeeper shrugged. "I haven't seen him yet today, but he'll turn up. A bit unpredictable, that one is."

Remus tried to form a picture of the last surviving member of Clan Abernethy. All that came to mind was an ancient wizard in a tartan bonnet, or maybe a somewhat younger male version of Professor McGonagall

MacDermott cleared his throat and handed Remus one of the pieces of parchment. "I'm to let you into the parlor--that's where the committee usually meets--to prepare the room."

This note was sealed with red wax that bore the imprint of a large and ornate letter D. As soon as Remus touched the seal, it vanished with a small pop, leaving only a faint scent of sherbet lemon in the air. The familiar flowing, spidery scrawl made clear what Dumbledore wanted him to do.

"Will you be needing anything, sir?"

"What?" Remus had lost himself in the note, running over in his mind what he must do.

"To prepare the room, as Professor Dumbledore said... is there anything I can get for you?"

"No, nothing," he replied vaguely, tapping the parchment on the edge of the table. The old wizard asked a lot of him, tired as he was, but he would do his best. He put down the paper and took up the knife and fork, saying more forcefully, "I'd best get started right after breakfast."

Even though the Change always left him ravenous, Remus often had trouble eating for days afterward. It might be that the werewolf transformation left parts of him in some confused and twisted state; he wasn't sure and had found few others of his kind to question about this sort of thing. In consequence, he was usually weakened for days until his stomach consented to take food, even though his body screamed for nourishment, and this meant that he walked around like a ghost, pale and gaunt. On this day, and on the previous one, he had managed to eat reasonably well, perhaps owing to the peculiar influence of Albus Dumbledore.

Breakfast finished, he stood and surveyed the parlor. Like the hall and public room, it had a high beamed ceiling. A dark wood-paneled wainscot ran around the room with white plaster walls above. At one end of the room, a large stone fireplace dominated the wall. Opposite the door were two long, thin windows covered with red drapes that fell to the floor. A round table and four chairs sat in the center of the room with a couple of other chairs perched next to the fireplace. Bookshelves and cabinets occupied some of the space at the walls. A casual inspection of the books showed that they were very dusty and almost exclusively from the seventeenth century. Remus was poking his nose into the 1610 edition of Hogwarts, A History when Eilidh came in, carrying linens and an armful of candles.

He turned and closed the book, noticing that she had changed into brown robes and had traded her many gold earrings for a pair of conservative pearls. The sight of her dressed this way saddened him unexpectedly.

"Freed from the kitchen, are you?" he remarked and put the volume on its shelf.

"Hmph" was her only comment as she set her burdens down on the table. But she did reward him with a brief smile before taking up her wand and directing candles to fly through the air, coming to rest in the brackets set on the walls around the room. Remus crossed his arms and watched her.

"Nice work," he commented. "You've paid attention in Charms class, I see."

She blushed and nodded rather seriously, then raised her wand and lit the candles with a flourish. They spluttered to life, bathing the room in soft yellow tones. She stepped toward the fireplace and prepared to light a fire, but Remus stopped her, saying, "No fire yet. I'll light it myself in a bit."

"Do you think I cannot do it?" she said sharply, turning to face him

with a mixture of confusion and defiance on her face.

"I have no doubt," Remus answered easily as he joined her in front of the fireplace, "but the room must be checked first, and that includes the fireplace."

"Checked? For what?"

A sudden bone-chilling gust of wind swept past them, extinguishing the candles and briefly swinging the heavy drapes. As quickly as it had arisen, the draft ceased and was followed by deep, rumbling laughter.

"For Dark creatures, of course," boomed a disembodied voice with a thick Scottish burr.

Remus raised his wand apprehensively, casting about the room for the location of the speaker. Eilidh, however, did not seem concerned. She set her hands on her hips and called, "Come out and show yourself, you sneaky bugger. You're no creature of Darkness, just a bloody pain in the arse."

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04 February 2000 to 04 February 2001

_ One year on fanfiction.net: What a long, strange trip it's been..._

More than a year ago, I wrote a story about my favorite HP character merely as an exercise--without dreaming that there was a universe of fanfiction authors out there all doing the same thing. A year ago, I had no clue as to how my life would change on one particular morning as I sat at my computer and figured out how to sign on to ff.n and upload my first post. (Okay, I never did figure out how to have a cool pen name....)

Over the past year, I've had lots of wonderful feedback in the form of reviews and e-mail correspondences. I've met terrific people and discovered an amazing community that exists solely in the abstract plane called the internet, yet brings people together in the way that real communities always have.

Thanks to all of you who have read my stories and a special blessing to those who have reviewed and criticized. I hope you've enjoyed reading as much as I have enjoyed writing.

I owe very special thanks to HHN and CLS, twins to me in ways that I cannot clearly articulate except perhaps in dreams or poetry. You've made the past year shine for me. Through your advice, encouragement, criticism, and fine examples, I've become a better writer. You're the best--and I count myself lucky indeed to know you.

Now, move along and read the next chapter...

~ CLS _(Revised 4/25/01)_

Disclaimer: this is a work of fiction based on characters created and owned by J K Rowling. No infringement of copyright is intended, only a bit of fun.

4. Ghost of the Highlands

Dragon's Glen

4. Ghost of the Highlands

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Accompanied by more laughter, the candles suddenly spluttered to life again and the pearly white, semi-translucent figure of a man walked through the fireplace and planted itself on the hearthstone. The apparition had long, wild hair and a densely tangled beard, and wore a long-sleeved tunic that fell in pleats at its knees. The original color of its garment was unknown, but there was no mistaking the silvery stain above its heart, bespeaking a violent end. It bowed, saying, "Hamish a--"

"Our resident ghost," cut in Eilidh acidly, "and resident expert at curdling milk, putting out candles, and frightening Muggles."

With a chortle, the ghost rose above their heads and swooped down from behind, causing the girl to shriek and clutch her backside.

"And pinching lasses," the ghost cackled, circling the pair while Eilidh let forth a string of curses that Remus was certain she hadn't learned in school. After a moment or two, it settled itself in front of them, assuming a cross-legged position while floating several feet above the floor.

"Whiskey and wenches," it sighed heavily, "that's what I miss the most."

The girl turned away with a toss of her head and busied herself shaking out the white linen cloth for the table. The ghost regarded Remus with narrowed eyes, stroking its beard thoughtfully.

"Remus, is it?" rumbled the ghost after a moment.

"A right nosy bugger, he is," Eilidh interjected.

"You may call me Hamish," it said indignantly to Remus, "and you're not to listen to the tales told by that one."

"Ha! You're naught but a four hundred year-old lecher!" she retorted.

"Three hundred and fifty, my lass," Hamish corrected with a chuckle, then addressed Remus, "and you would be Dumbledore's boy."

"I am here at his request," he replied carefully.

"And you're to search for wee Dark creatures in the parlor. Well, get on with it, lad. Let's see how you go." With that, the ghost uncrossed its legs and floated up to the ceiling, hovering near the center of the room and peering down at them.

Remus couldn't help but smile as he walked about the room with his wand held out, inspecting shelves and cabinets whilst casting certain spells intended to reveal the true nature of things seen and unseen. He'd had enough experience with ghosts at Hogwarts Castle to conclude that Hamish was indeed the genuine article. Whether or not ghosts should be included in the pantheon of Dark creatures had been a subject of much debate among wizards over the ages. Being considered a Dark creature himself, Remus didn't think that the distinction could or should be terribly sharp.

He stopped in front of a small mirror with an ornate, gilt frame where he beheld the image of his pale, thin face surrounded by graying brown hair tinted gold by the candlelight. As he watched, the mirror's surface grew cloudy and his reflection dissolved into white mist. He stepped back as Hamish's broad, grinning face formed itself out of the fog.

"Mirror or scrying glass? What say you, lad?" challenged the ghost as it popped out of the mirror to stand before him.

"A simple mirror, nothing more," Remus concluded.

"Right you are!" it replied gleefully. Trailing Remus as he slowly walked the length the room, the ghost went on, "What lurks in yonder fireplace?"

"The fireplace and chimney are perfectly ordinary, but--" He hesitated, feeling and then seeing the large silver candelabra that Eilidh was polishing on the central table. He gave it a wide berth as he made his way to a waist-high wooden cabinet that held a crystal decanter and a half-dozen glasses on top.

"Have you caught the scent of a Dark beastie, lad?"

"Mmmm," he said, shifting his attention to the doors of the cabinet. Hamish winked out and reappeared on the top of the cabinet with a loud pop, leering at Remus and rattling the glasses slightly to produce a faint musical tinkling.

"What it is?" Eilidh said, coming up from behind him with the candelabra held out in front of her like a weapon.

"Er, put that down, please," Remus said uncomfortably, then continued in a more professorial tone, "Surely you know how to defeat a Boggart, Miss MacDermott."

The ghost cackled and rocked the cabinet more, while the girl set down the silver and said, "Oooh, no. I do not care for Boggarts. They always turn into the Banshee when I come upon them."

"Your course in Defense Against the Dark Arts has certainly been deficient. There is a simple charm--"

Before he could finish, the cabinet, which shuddered with increasing violence, flew open. Hamish zoomed upward, then dived down to hover at his shoulder. The dim interior of the cabinet seemed to hold nothing but dark bottles of liquor and more glasses. Eilidh, shielding herself as best she could behind Remus, peered inside timidly then gasped as a silvery ball took shape above the open doors.

"Riddikulus!" Remus cried and there was a loud crack that made the girl jump backward. The bright white sphere shimmered and for an instant the shadowy patterns of the mountains and craters of the moon coalesced on its face, then rippled and vanished, to be replaced by a leering replica of Hamish the ghost.

The girl erupted into giggles and shrieks, joined by ghostly hoots from above. Remus laughed, too, as the ghostly Boggart exploded with a second sharp crack, sending thousands of glittering white shards flying outward like an erupting snowball.

"Aye, laddie," it chortled, flying in circles around Remus and the girl, "You shall pay for that roguish trick."

Remus sketched a bow to the ghost, trying to keep a straight face.

"Drink with me, you will!" it cried and plunged into the open cabinet, now Boggart-free.

A moment later, a dusty, brown bottle floated out of the interior, wobbling and sloshing the contents as it made its way through the air. A glass followed the bottle's flight. Both hung in mid-air in front of Remus as the cork popped out and the bottle floated on its side, pouring a thin stream of amber liquid into the glass. Eilidh scowled and grabbed the bottle, while Remus merely stared, fascinated by the ghostly effort at drink service. He caught the glass as it began to fall, however, just as Hamish winked into sight.

"Usquebach," the ghost pronounced, "that's whiskey to you bloody English. Go on, drink up, lad."

"But, I don't--" protested Remus.

Saying, "Och, what kind of a man are you?" the ghost dove into the glass, making the whiskey splash up the sides as it passed through. Remus' fingers went numb, as if they'd suddenly plunged into arctic waters. He set the glass down and massaged his fingers, trying to get some feeling back into them.

The vapors, whether carried by some ghostly means or merely by air currents, hit him with an overpowering smoky aroma, like the smell of wet clothing drying over a peat fire on a cold winter night. He wondered how anyone could drink something so unpleasant, a reaction quite opposite the ghost's.

"I do miss a wee dram from time to time," it sighed, reforming its pearly figure in front of him and making a loud smacking sound. "Aye, such a tragedy it is--the whiskey's been getting better since my death and I can but barely taste it."

"Wasted on the likes of you," Eilidh grumbled as she put the bottle back in the cabinet and closed the doors forcefully. "Perhaps Mr. Lupin knows a spell that'll keep you out of the liquor cabinet."

"And what about you, my girl?" countered the ghost angrily, flying up and hovering near her face. "You've been known to take a nip when the

old man's not looking."

"Please," Remus interjected, wondering how to separate a ghost from a human in a fight. Surely it wasn't harder than keeping Slytherins away from Gryffindors, and vice versa. "I have work yet to finish here. Perhaps you'd care to continue this discussion somewhere else?"

"Get you gone, lass," chuckled Hamish. The ghost backed away from the girl and said archly, "There is work to be done here."

Remus did not like the sound of that, as he'd hoped to have some peace to complete the task that Dumbledore had set for him. Ghostly assistance was not part of his plan.

"You can have the old pain in the arse," she sniffed. "Bloody helpful, he is."

Eilidh turned to go, grateful to leave. She stopped with her hand resting on the door knob, puzzled about something, and said hesitantly, "One question, if you please: when the Boggart came out, why wasn't it scary?"

"Why indeed?" mused Hamish. The ghost drifted in front of Remus, staring at him suspiciously.

"You'd be surprised, Miss MacDermott," he said, stepping around the ghost and holding the door open for her, "about the things that will scare people."

"But it was just the moon, right?" she persisted.

Before he could reply, a cold blast tore through his chest, knocking the wind out of him. He doubled over, grabbing the back of a chair to keep from collapsing. Eilidh directed angry words at the ghost as it flitted above them, but Remus waved her away.

"Please go," he coughed, still feeling chilled and numb where the ghost had passed through him.

When she had gone, closing the door behind her, Hamish drew up beside him. "Och, you're a queer one," it laughed, regarding him steadily with dark, empty eyes. "Is Dumbledore daft?"

Remus couldn't answer that, but was starting to question his own mental health.

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"Wake up, laddie."

Something cold brushed his nose. Remus sat up with a start. He had been dozing in front of a fire, but all else save the fire was alien. Instead of the oak planks of his cabin, dark wood paneling flanked the stone fireplace. He sat in a big leather armchair, not the simple wooden chair that his grandfather had built.

"No time for a nap," said the voice again. "They'll be arriving soon."



He knew where he was now, and knew who (or what) had been speaking. He looked around for the ghost, but the public room of the lodge was empty. A half-eaten bowl of mutton stew and a plate of scones sat on the table beside him. He must have dozed off while waiting for the arrival of Dumbledore and the rest. There were voices coming from the hall, indicating that his ghostly alarm clock had not been playing tricks on him. He sat up and brushed crumbs from his robes, but didn't rise, feeling too muddled from sleep, still in the grip of vague dreams that he couldn't remember but couldn't shake off either.

Doubts about the merits of coming to Scotland and of standing before this committee descended upon him like a roc--that enormous magical bird sometimes glimpsed in Mediterranean lands--landing on a flimsy hut. He would be crushed.

After all, who except Dumbledore would trust a werewolf to guard a dragon?

Last night there had been something--urgency, concern, and unexpected fragility-- in the old wizard's voice that had infected him, bringing back to the surface the outrage and sense of injustice he had felt so often when Lord Voldemort or his supporters menaced the order and security of the wizarding world. And there was the matter of the family secret that no one had bothered to tell him. His mother's people had been dragonkeepers, it seemed. Did that really make him suitable for the job?

He stood, stretched, and put on his hat, then nearly collided with Eilidh who had come running from the kitchen. They stood at the doorway together and watched as MacDermott bustled about, taking the cloaks from two wizards, one of whom had just emerged from the fireplace. The purple cloak belonged to Albus Dumbledore, of course. The tall, thin wizard was unmistakable with or without his cloak.

"Oooh, who's that with Professor Dumbledore?" whispered Eilidh, watching the other wizard hand a jet black cloak to the innkeeper.

"Not sure," Remus murmured. "The heads of the departments of Magical Law Enforcement and Magical Creatures sit on the committee, but I don't know which he is."

The unfamiliar wizard seemed like a candidate for Magical Law Enforcement. He was shorter than Dumbledore (and considerably younger), but broad and powerfully built with the stiff carriage of a terrier hunting for rats. His dark brown hair and mustache were clipped short, precisely and neatly.

"Where are Ferguson-Smith and this Abernethy fellow?" he said gruffly to Dumbledore.

"She will arrive soon; her secretary assured me that she would end her meeting early," replied the old wizard pleasantly. "As for The Abernethy, have you seen him today, MacDermott?"

"I have not seen him myself, sir, but I'm certain he'll turn up."

"Time is being wasted," grunted the shorter wizard, flicking dark glances around the room, taking in the details in a way which suggested an inherent paranoia and suspicious nature.

Definitely a candidate for Magical Law Enforcement, Remus concluded. When the man's dark eyes--deeply set in a pale, square face--fell upon him, he was surprised at what he glimpsed there: something very old and unexpectedly reptilian.

"Well, I think he's rather good looking," murmured Eilidh, blushing as the man regarded her momentarily.

"Don't stand there gawking, girl," boomed MacDermott, noticing the pair in the doorway. "Take the gentleman's cloaks."

The girl giggled nervously and hurried to take the cloaks that her father thrust at her. Remus detached himself more slowly from the doorframe and came forward.

"Remus!" Dumbledore peered at him over the rims of his half-moon spectacles. "You look rested. Any trouble in getting things ready?"

Before he could reply, the other newcomer thrust out his hand, saying, "Michael Naughton, Magical Law Enforcement."

"Remus Lupin," he replied simply, unsure of how he might describe himself so succinctly: Unemployed teacher? Werewolf for hire?

Naughton had a firm, hard grip and seemed slightly surprised that he didn't cause the other man to wince. His eyes narrowed as he inspected Remus' face closely, prolonging the handshake as if he were waiting for a confession of some sort.

"Mr. Lupin has kindly agreed to assist me," Dumbledore said vaguely, with a nod toward the parlor door. "Shall we go in and wait for the others?"

Grateful for the old wizard's intervention, Remus nodded his head and disentangled himself from Naughton's grip. He led the way to the door and took out his wand to undo the locking spell he'd placed on it earlier. When the other two had entered, and seated themselves around the table, Remus followed. He sat in a chair next to the fireplace, uncertain of what his status would be in the proceedings.

"Tea," queried the innkeeper as he came in with a plate of biscuits and cakes, "or shall it be something stronger?"

"Tea will do for me," said Dumbledore, "but I should think sherry and whiskey will be wanted when the others arrive."

"Brandy and absinthe," drawled Naughton as he inspected the room intently, probably looking for hidden traps or lurking Dark creatures.

With a worried nod, MacDermott withdrew and Remus could hear him hissing instructions to his daughter outside the room. Presently, he heard another voice, a woman speaking in a crisp alto tone, saying, "Good to see you, MacDermott. Are the others here? Hope I'm not too

late."

One down and one to go, Remus thought. This must be Ferguson-Smith, the head of Magical Creatures. But when the woman entered the room, passing her tweed cloak to the hovering innkeeper, Remus realized with a shock that he knew her.

"Ah, Ariadne," cried Dumbledore, jumping up and taking her hand, "we have just arrived ourselves."

Ari Ferguson of Ravenclaw, that's how he remembered her, a tall large-boned girl who even then had a fascination with Magical Creatures of all sorts. Ravenclaw and Gryffindor had done lessons in Care of Magical Creatures together during his fourth and fifth years at school and he had become friends with Ari, after a fashion. Whatever friendship there was between them had fallen apart during seventh year through a series of events that he hadn't thought about in years, and did not wish to relive, even in memory. He was fairly certain that she had not forgiven him. He was probably free to tell her the true story after all these years, but hoped that he'd never have to.

He tried to put those memories aside as he rose, forcing himself to smile, and said, "Hullo, Ariadne. It's been a long time."

Although she was still thin and angular, her once-freckled face had changed in the years since school, becoming weatherbeaten and craggy. Her hair, brown streaked with blond, was no longer the wild mess it had been, but hidden discreetly under her hat with no hint of disorder. The blue eyes now regarding him with a piercing stare were the same, however, and about as friendly as the last time he'd seen her.

"Lupin, I didn't know that you'd be-" Turning to Dumbledore, she murmured in confusion, "You didn't tell me that this... that he was the one you spoke of."

"Let the past be forgotten, Ariadne," Dumbledore said in a surprisingly forceful tone as he stepped between them. "We must all stand together in times such as these. Remus possesses unique talents, as I shall explain presently."

She glared at Remus while listening to Dumbledore, her arms crossed and her lips set tightly in a thin line. With a nod to the old wizard, she took her seat. From the table, Naughton had watched this interchange closely, although his stony face gave no hint of a reaction. Remus sat down as well, more certain than ever that this committee would have none of him.

Tension in the room was diffused slightly when MacDermott came in with drinks and there was the usual fussing over who would have what. Ariadne wanted tea and a glass of sherry, while Naughton contented himself with the large snifter of dark amber liquid set in front of him.

"Let's get on with this, Dumbledore," Naughton said as he set down his glass forcefully, causing the drink to slosh violently. "You've dragged me away from the Ministry--and you know what a state it's in these days--without a sufficient explanation. I didn't even realize that I sat on this committee until you showed up in my office this

morning."

"The committee has not met in some time," replied Dumbledore, unruffled by the gruff manner, "and you are new to the job. Considering the fate of your predecessor... well, I hardly think that he had time to explain all the duties to you."

"Yes, yes," he growled, waving a hand dismissively, "but where is Abernethy? Can't we get started without him?"

Remus felt a chill on his legs, in spite of the heat from the fire, and looked down to see the ghost poking its head out from under the chair. He looked up quickly to see if any of the others had noticed. Dumbledore nodded pleasantly in his direction, but gave no clue as to whether he could see the apparition.

"Well, laddie, about time to show them what you can do, eh?" chuckled the ghost softly. "But I think you'll be needing some help."

Oh, no," Remus whispered, "I'm sure that we can get along fine without--" But the ghost vanished and at the same time the candles in the room spluttered and then flared brilliantly. Remus didn't think that things could get much worse, but he'd forgotten about the unique talents that Hamish possessed.

As the candles flickered, Naughton cast suspicious glances around the room. "See here, Dumbledore," he said as he rapped on the table with his knuckles, "have any of the usual security measures been taken? The room could be crawling with Dark creatures! We could be vulnerable to any manner of attack, including by the Dark Lord. You should have allowed me to bring some of my staff."

Dumbledore raised a hand to silence the Magical Law Enforcement chief, while giving a slight nod to Remus.

"In the current state of affairs, I wish to involve as few people in the Ministry as possible," said the old wizard gravely. "We have returned to the old, dark days of suspicion in which we scarcely know whom to trust. I have asked Remus to take responsibility for security and I believe you will find the arrangements more than adequate."

Remus rose, subjected to Naughton's withering glare, and said, "The room has been checked for Dark creatures and wards have been set. I will activate them whenever the committee wishes."

"Let's see these wards," Naughton commanded, standing up and pounding the table.

"But you are still missing a member of the committee," Remus said with a glance toward Dumbledore.

"Please proceed, Remus," said the old wizard mildly. "The Abernethy will make his presence known when he is ready."

Remus raised his wand, pointing to the four corners of the room in turn. Each glowed briefly with a soft blue light, like the final hue of sunset in a cloudless sky or the color of flax in full sunlight, showing him that the wards were ready to be activated.

Earlier, Remus had painstakingly created the spells now woven into the very walls of the room that, when fully activated, would prevent the passage of any and all magical creatures. On the nights of the full moon, these wards had served Remus well, making him feel secure that the wolf could not get out, nor could anyone else get in. It was this particular spell that Dumbledore had asked him to create here in the parlor.

A unique word of command was also worked into the spell so that only the wizard who created it could activate and deactivate the wards, making it difficult for another wizard to break. Remus turned away from the others, raised his wand, and whispered, "\_Dog Star.\_" Immediately the room was filled with the peculiar blue light that did not appear to come from anywhere in particular, but shone from every point in space at the same time. The light flared and died in the time it took Remus to turn and face the committee members. A faint blue glow remained on the walls, but it quickly vanished as well.

Dumbledore seemed pleased, while Ariadne merely raised an eyebrow at him. Naughton took his own wand and jabbed it at various points in the room, sending jets of orange-red sparks flying at the walls and ceiling. None of his attempts to penetrate the magical fence were successful and he gave up after several grim minutes of trying.

"These will do," Naughton said brusquely, but his eyes lingered on Remus, narrowing with grudging respect and blatant curiosity.

There followed a moment of silence in which all present seemed to be waiting for someone else to speak first. In the end, the stillness was broken not by a word, but by rattling noises from one of the windows. Heads turned as the rattling became pounding accompanied by faint shouts.

"Open a portal, please," said Dumbledore calmly to Remus, gesturing fluidly toward the red curtains hanging over the window.

Once the wards were set, it was possible to create an opening in the fabric of the spell for a brief period of time and this Remus did by pointing his wand at the window and murmuring the word of command. A glowing blue rectangle pulsed to life and vanished, letting in--as Remus had feared--the ghost. Maybe Dumbledore was daft after all.

Hamish winked at Remus as he flew past, a broad grin on his luminescent white face. He then turned his attention to the committee. Dumbledore and Ariadne did not seem surprised to see him in the least, but Naughton was working up to a spluttering outrage.

The ghost beat him to the punch, however. "Dumbledore, what is the bloody meaning of this?" it raged. "You've gone and made a wall that'll stop even myself and there are not many wizards that can do such a thing."

"May I present Hamish Abernethy," Dumbledore said to the fuming Naughton, "the last surviving member of Clan Abernethy of Strathdraich."

"Time is being wasted, lady and gentlemen," Hamish said gruffly, in unrestrained imitation of Naughton's bluster. The ghost winked at Remus once more and took a seat at the table, or at least floated close to the chair. "Pour out a wee dram and let's get on with it."

Remus smiled and sat down, stretching his legs in front of the fire and relaxing for the first time all day. This promised to be a very interesting meeting.

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Thanks to Dave, Dorothy and Mio for beta-reading.

Apologies to my friend Dr. Ferguson-Smith: I borrowed your surname for this story because I've always liked the sound of it, and not because I believe that you bear the slightest resemblance to the character of Ariadne.

_Note that this story was begun before Goblet of Fire came out. Certain inconsistencies remain and there's not much I can do about them. I hope that the story can be enjoyed in spite of them. There's lots more of 'Dragon's Glen' to come, but when it will get written, I cannot say. Other non-fanfiction writing projects tug at me, too.

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In the meantime, go read 'Call of the Wild' or 'Boys' Own Camping Adventure.'

~ CLS (Revised 3/9/01)

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